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Wells and War: H.G. Wells's writings on military subjects, before the Great War

R.T. Stearn

The past twenty years have seen renewed popular and academic interest in H.G. Wells. A succession of scholarly works has increased our knowledge, understanding and fascination with Wells. This paper builds on, and is much indebted to, these works by Bergonzi, Mackenzie, Parrinder, Raknem, Travers, Wagar, Wilson and others, and members of this Society will find here much that is familiar. For this paper is essentially an essay in synthesis and reinterpretation. It uses Wells's writings and recent Wells scholarship, together with military and naval history, to suggest certain hypotheses about one aspect of Wells' writing before the Great War. Maybe further research will modify or disprove them. Maybe researchers will sally out from Illinois to batter its surmises with file-cards, and slaughter its insights with transcripts. Possibly it should be, as Wells suggested of school textbooks, so constructed as to burst into flames after a short life.

Military Writing and Reputation

Wells in his later years repeatedly asserted his military prescience,¹ and some have seen him as a military prophet who was repeatedly vindicated.² His achievement is apparently impressive.³ In *The War of the Worlds* (1898) he wrote of heat rays and poison gas; and in 'The Land Ironclads' (1903) of armoured fighting vehicles attacking trenches. He wrote of aerial war in *When the Sleeper Wakes* (1899), *Anticipations* (1901), 'A Dream of Armageddon' (1903) and *The War in the Air* (1908). He wrote of civilian panics and streams of refugees in *The War of the Worlds*, total war in *Anticipations* and *The War in the Air*, and of atomic war in *The World Set Free* (1914). Wells himself, and Wells scholars since, adduced his fiction as evidence of military insight and prescience, and the case for Wells as a military thinker has been based largely on his fiction. However, before 1914 Wells, and his reviewers and readers, regarded his non-fiction as the primary vehicle of his thinking. As Raknem⁴ and Parrinder⁵ have shown, the message of his non-fiction was taken seriously in a way that his fiction was not.⁶ Moreover, in *Anticipations* he asserted the superiority of non-fiction over fiction in considering the future; dismissing fiction because unscientific, without adequate demonstration or alternatives, and because "the very form of fiction carries with it something of a disavowal."⁷ Also, as we shall see, Wells before 1914, despite his later claims, did not see the significance, the applicability to real life, of his fictional insights on war. So he must be evaluated as a military thinker largely by the considered opinions stated in his non-fiction, rather than by his fiction.

Before 1914 he wrote relatively little on war. Apart from some fiction,⁸ some journalism and his books on toy-soldier war-gaming, he considered war in *Anticipations*, *First and Last Things* (1908) and his small volume of collected journalism, *An Englishman Looks at the World* (1914), and in these war was only a relatively small part of the subject matter.⁹ Of these, *Anticipations* had by far the longest and most important coverage, and so I shall concentrate on it.

Wells, as Orwell later noted, was from the "non-military middle class."¹⁰ However, he was from boyhood interested in war, and fought imaginary wars, what he called "phantom wars". One of his earliest surviving works is a war story. About 1879, when about twelve years old, he wrote *The Desert Daisy*, now familiar from the Illinois facsimile.¹¹ This was "humorous" puerilia, but is remarkable for the precocity and continuity of his attitudes. In it he expressed attitudes he never changed throughout his entire oeuvre: undeferential, hostile and contemptuous of established authorities — church, monarchy, politicians and military. The bishop was a traitor and thief, the cabinet included a donkey, and the general was called Edie Otte (idiot) and lost his army.¹² That military authorities were stupid was to be a recurring theme of Wells's military writing, up to and including his Second World War journalism.

The Military Cycling Controversy

Wells's first publication on a specifically military subject, and his first involvement in military controversy, was on the subject of military cycling, in 1900. As a freelance journalist in the nineties he had become accustomed to writing short magazine articles on a variety of topics. He had also become a cyclist. So when he chanced on the War Office cyclist drillbook, he decided to write an article on it, using his cycling knowledge to attack it.

His success as a writer was in part due to his topicality, his sensing the public mind and being essentially a man of his time even if also, to some extent, he saw beyond it. In late 1900 with the Boer War there was immense public concern about British military faults. Denunciation of the War Office, long a theme of military reformers, had become a journalistic commonplace and reached a crescendo in the bitter jeremiads of such imperialist reformers as Spenser Wilkinson and Arnold White.¹³ Wells responded to this mood, and expressed also his own resentful contempt for what he saw as the inefficiency and stupidity of the establishment.

His article, 'The Cyclist Soldier' was published in December 1900 in the *Fortnightly Review*.¹⁴ In it he claimed the drillbook was written by a person, "some not very athletic senior" (p199), lacking cycling experience; that it was contrary to cycling experience, the equipment and uniform unsuitable and the drill useless. Greatcoats were unnecessary when cycling or fighting, and for sleeping waterproof sleeping bags would be better. Regarding cyclists as infantry, the War Office ignored their potential as a mobile force, and retarded their development. Cyclists should be regarded as cyclists and organised in large independent forces with a mobile role. He claimed the cyclist arm "may even be destined to be the dominant arm in the European warfare of the future" (p914). He wrote in a tone of sarcasm and contempt, of reprimanding yet another example of War Office ignorance and stupidity. He claimed the drill book's compilers had "neither the intelligence nor the imagination necessary for their task" (p914).

He condemned the cyclist officer's sword, and commented, "When I reflect upon that word I cannot understand why the War Office did not provide a sham tail for the officer's bicycle. It would be tremendously dressy....and would give dignity and distinction, and make the army attractive to the sort of young men who are attracted by that sort of thing. And if a tail why not a cloth for either knee (with the regimental colours) and a horse head of moulded cardboard over the handlebars?"

(p916). He demanded a radical reform of military cycling and claimed the War Office would do this only if forced by external pressure.

Wells had not expected any serious reply to his article, but the officer who had written the drillbook, Lt. Colonel Eustace Balfour, replied with an article in the February 1901 *Fortnightly Review*.¹⁵ Eustace Balfour, younger brother of A.J. Balfour, commanded the London Scottish and was a leading protagonist of the Volunteer Force. He was also, as he asserted in his article, a long-experienced cyclist, a pioneer of military cycling and an officer with more experience than any other of handling large bodies of military cyclists. He defended himself and his drillbook, answered Wells' criticisms and suggestions, claimed Britain led the world in military cycling, and quoted a letter from an officer in South Africa on the success of British military cyclists there. He claimed the drill was necessary for handling large numbers of cyclists. He explained why greatcoats were necessary and sleeping-bags no substitute: "Picture a....patrol going its rounds as if it were engaged in a sack race, and imagine the vigilance of a night-sentry in a sleeping bag" (p300). He condemned Wells' article as dogmatic and vulgarly abusive. Wells was ignorant of military cycling and had not bothered to investigate it. He had not read the voluminous literature, nor attended manoeuvres, but had written, "without any attempt to acquire any knowledge of his subject" (p302). Wells, Balfour claimed, "must now sit revealed as the armchair ignorant person" (p303).

Wells replied in a letter to the *Fortnightly*¹⁶ reasserting his criticisms, claiming Balfour's article had confirmed them, and that if military cycling were not reformed there would be heavy losses in a future war. He was unchastened by Balfour's facts; typically, he still saw himself as the righteous reformer, and wrote privately about the dispute. "Damn the Empire of bloody idiots!...I simply want to ventilate a dangerously stuffy corner".¹⁷

This exchange on military cycling was in itself of little importance, but it is of significance in considering Wells as a military thinker, for in it he expressed attitudes he was to repeat throughout his life, while Balfour identified basic faults of his military writing. Wells's article expressed his hostility and contempt for military professionals, his belief that they were selected by class not merit¹⁸ and were stupid, incompetent and conservative, and ignored the potential of technical innovation:¹⁹ his was basically an "Edie Otte" or "Colonel Blimp" view of the military.²⁰ Colonel Balfour's reply identified faults which, ignoring Balfour, Wells failed to correct; his ignorance and inexperience, his unawareness of problems and difficulties; his failure to study and investigate; his ignoring military literature;²¹ and his insulting tone towards the military²² — his "mixture of ignorance, vulgar abuse, and dogmatic assertion."²³

In *Anticipations* Wells condemned, "The people of the governing class (who) do not understand there is such a thing as special knowledge or an inexorable fact in the world" (p154). Yet despite this, he himself never realised any need to study military subjects before pronouncing on them. He did not apply scientific method to military problems. He simply presumed he knew enough, and that his judgement must be right. It was a curious blindness resulting presumably partly from his character; from his impatience, intolerance and arrogance, confirmed by his success from 1901

in his self-appointed role as pundit and prophet. In part it resulted from his class-hostility to officers, confirmed in his view by the Boer War.

Wells had no experience of soldiering — not even Lloyd George's brief Volunteering — or of war.²⁴ He could, like Kipling or Arnold-Forster, have learned by talking to soldiers. He never bothered to. He apparently never even considered the sort of military self-education Bloch or Spenser Wilkinson achieved. Wells' presumption of adequate knowledge, his failure to inquire and to study, resulted in his continued military ignorance, which he repeatedly revealed by basic errors of fact. For example, in *Anticipations* he claimed that the British army had no railway troops, and that there was "an absolute dearth of British military literature" (p210). As Dr. Travers has noted,²⁵ he was familiar with Bloch's work — which anyway was then well known. Beyond this he had only an ordinary newspaper-reader's acquaintance with military matters. In his ignorance, he stood outside the main military debates of his time. Moreover his failure to study other subjects was noted by contemporaries. Reviewers criticised his ignorance and failure to read recognised authorities. Beatrice Webb's comment on Wells and social institutions is applicable also on military subjects: "he did not want to examine...social institutions; he wanted to judge them."²⁶ His combination of ignorance and dogmatic assertion continued throughout his military writing and led later to his grossly underestimating German military power in 1914²⁷ and again in 1942,²⁸ and also to his proclaiming in 1944 that Churchill's weakness as a war leader was his inability to sack anyone, and that Hitler would never commit suicide.²⁹

Anticipations

In 1901 Wells published his first major non-fiction work, *Anticipations*. It sold well and was favourably reviewed, much praised and influential. The success was partly because it was opportune, coming out at the time of shock, reappraisal and demand for change caused by the Boer War. *Anticipations* established Wells' reputation as a thinker, a man with a message, who was taken seriously.

Anticipations was about the future, a wide-ranging work with war only one among the subjects considered. What is significant is the extent to which — contrary to his image as the prophet far ahead of his contemporaries — *Anticipations* showed Wells as largely a man of his time, sharing widely held assumptions. For example, condemnation of British education and demand for experts were repeated late 19th century themes, which reached a climax in the Boer War and resultant 'Efficiency' agitation. Condemnation of the party political system and of politicians was another recurrent theme, and reached a climax in the imperialist disillusionment with the Salisbury government during the Boer War, expressed by, for example, Spencer Wilkinson and Arnold White.³⁰ *Anticipations* was part of the Boer War literature of denunciation and reform: despite differences, it had much in common with *Efficiency and Empire*.

Wells criticised the army for obsolete attitudes and for rejecting the opportunities of science and technology. He criticised officers as obsolete, incompetent and relying on muddling through. He criticised other ranks as drunken, untrained and often physically inadequate because recruited from the least fit. He claimed the army was based not on merit and expertise but social class — "the plaything of its

gentlefolk" (p204). He condemned the treatment of private soldiers and "the really imbecile patronage in which the British soldier lives" (p209). Here he was largely echoing Boer War press criticism, and pre-war reformers' demands for modernisation, higher quality personnel, improved training and officer professionalism; though he went beyond the usual opinions in his criticism of the treatment of other ranks. Most civilian military reformers were very cautious on this; possibly because, trying to establish themselves as military experts, they wanted the acceptance of officers and would not risk being regarded as trouble-making faddists. Dilke, for example, though politically an "advanced" radical, wrote little and cautiously on it.³¹ Wells's resentment of the officer class gave him a different attitude.

Though largely ignorant of their writings, he condemned military reformers, whom he saw as self-publicising 'establishment' figures proposing insignificant modifications, not radical reform. He mocked them: "He is, one may remark, something of an army reformer, without offence, of course, to the Court people or the Government people.... He has written quite cleverly on the subject of Recruiting and advocated as much as twopence more a day and billiard rooms under the chaplain's control; he has invented a military bicycle with a wheel of solid iron that can be used as a shield; and a war correspondent and, indeed, any one who writes even the most casual and irresponsible article on military questions is a person worth his cultivating. He is the very life and soul of army reform....that is to say, army reform without a single step towards a social revolution" (p207-8).

Wells's own proposal for army reform was radical. Throughout *Anticipations* he expressed extreme distrust of existing government apparatus; seeing it not as a possible instrument of change, but as irrelevant or an obstacle. Here he expressed — in an extreme form — an attitude widespread at the time of the Boer War disillusionment. Arnold White, for example, demanded not only re-organisation of the War Office but complete replacement of its personnel.³² Wells proposed to by-pass and replace existing state apparatus by new organisations, with his New Republic ultimately replacing the existing state. He proposed — instead of attempting to reform the existing army — to leave its messes, bands and uniforms "as an appendage to the Court", and to create anew, "in complete independence of it", a modern professional army — without bands, colours, chaplains or honorary colonels — "a reading, experimenting army under an absolutely distinct war office, with its own colleges, depots and training camps perpetually ready for war" (p210).

In this Wells went far beyond contemporary army reformers who basically accepted the existing army, its traditions and values, while demanding improvement. Wells' rejecting of the role of tradition and its symbols in esprit de corps and morale — and indeed, his often ignoring moral factors in war — was typical of his materialist "disinherited mind."³³ The idea of a radically new, an alternative army, was not unique to Wells; some of the early Volunteer Force advocates had envisaged this,³⁴ and in 1904 Kipling was to publish his aptly-named 'The Army of a Dream'. However with Wells it probably arose from his social resentment and his hostility to the existing system.

His ideal army would be expert, professional and efficient, with high-quality personnel. It would no longer recruit the dregs of society. Again this idea was

hardly original: expressing both the repeated demand, from Cardwell onwards for a better class of recruit, and the Boer War concern at the high rejection rate, on medical grounds, of would-be recruits. Wells's army would be a small elite force, in contrast to the former mass, low quality army. This has been seen as evidence of the quality of his military thought³⁵ but, may rather indicate his limitations. It was not an original idea; Conan Doyle and others made similar proposals.³⁶ Wells failed to think through his proposals and see the obvious objection to a small force, however high its quality: i.e. that its effectiveness is dependent on the enemy force being of decisively lower quality; if the enemy is of similar quality, then numbers may well be decisive. Also he failed to reconcile his assumption of a small elite force with his reading of Bloch. Wells's elite army indicated not prescience but conservatism; his continued acceptance of the nineteenth-century assumption that a small British force could defeat a larger enemy force, derived from colonial wars and episodes such as Rorke's Drift and the 1893 Matabele War; his contrast of the elite intelligent force of riflemen with the traditional mass army repeated a common view of the contrast between the Boers and the British, and ignored the role of British numbers in defeating the Boers.

Wells's view of future war was in part influenced by Ivan S. Bloch, the Warsaw banker and pre-eminent civilian writer on future warfare, who in the 1890s foretold a war of trenches, stalemate and attrition, and whose conclusions were published in England in *Is War Now Impossible?* (1899) and publicised by the British press.³⁷ Following Bloch, Wells claimed war would be changed by technology and increased firepower, and would involve entire populations, "a monstrous thrust and pressure of people against people" (p183). At the forward edge of battle would be trenches, backed by artillery and observation balloons, and battle would essentially be between lines of riflemen. He emphasised the importance of the "aerial factor". He claimed that "very probably before 1950" there would be successful flying machines, which would fight with rams and guns, and drop bombs. War would start with battle for command of the air and so for ability to use observation balloons: "once command of the air is obtained by one of the contending armies, the war must become a conflict between a seeing host and one that is blind" (p195). Advance would be led by "the aerial van". Cyclists and "ironclad road fighting machines" would advance along the roads. The enemy would be forced to surrender by seizure of their food and water supplies; and guerrilla resistance would be defeated by pressure on local authorities and denial of supplies.

Such a picture was, of course, partly derived from press coverage of the Boer War; the emphasis on riflemen was typical, and observation balloons were much publicised by the illustrated journals and in the short films of the war. Wells' scenario raised questions he failed adequately to answer, notably the problem postulated by Bloch, of trench war stalemate. Wells claimed there would be mobile decisive war, but failed to adequately explain how the stalemate would be broken. He suggested one side would, by aerial combat, win command of the air, and so gain the crucial advantage of observation — the "seeing" against the "blind" — of psychological effect — he emphasised that "the moral effect of this predominance will be enormous....with a sense of loss and insecurity" (p195) and destroying, by bombing, enemy supplies and communications and preventing reinforcements — thus decisively contributing to the collapse of the front line. He denied that

armoured fighting vehicles could break the stalemate of firepower and trenches. He claimed that, though they would be attempted, land ironclads would fail under artillery fire: "Wheels smashed by shells, iron tortoises gallantly rushed by hidden men, and unhappy marksmen and engineers being shot at as they bolt from some such monster oversight" (p189). In fact — and this was a decisive break from Bloch who declared "the advantage is always with the defending force" — Wells held a belief in the offensive similar to Maude and others of the offensive school,³⁸ and wrote, "I believe invincibly that the side that can go fastest and hit hardest will always win....in spite of massive defences, and no ingenuity in devising massive defence will shake that belief" (p190).

Wells's scenario showed both the quality of his thought, and its limitations. He has been seen as a prophet of blitzkrieg. His scenario of aerial attack breaking the front by attack behind it was in part an extrapolation from Boer attacks on British communications, and from earlier cavalry raids. Nevertheless it showed what Wells was capable of as a military thinker. Essentially original, it broke from Bloch — who declared "No decisive war is possible"³⁹ and ignored the aerial factor in war — and it gave a possible answer to Bloch's stalemate. It may be seen as partially anticipating the Allied plan for a tank and bomber offensive for 1919, 'Plan 1919', and the Nazi Blitzkrieg tactics. Nevertheless, the brilliance of his conception was flawed by a failure to think through and to consider possible difficulties and obstacles. Rejecting armoured fighting vehicles (other than armoured cars on roads), he failed to postulate land forces which could advance cross-country against firepower and trenches. He failed to explain why the forces advancing along the roads should not be stopped by obstacles and firepower, by "an impenetrable zone of fire" as Bloch postulated.⁴⁰ Wells suggested, in effect, blitzkrieg without armour. Lacking armour, his strategy depended on decisive air superiority. Of course, one side might have such superiority — it was a reasonable postulate — or might win it as Wells — echoing naval orthodoxy on command of the sea — suggested winning command of the air.

Nevertheless Wells — always intolerant of any opposition or delay — ensured such superiority postulating an essentially unequal war. He claimed that as war became more scientific, so preparation became more important and, "Warfare in the future....will be much more one-sided than it has ever been in the past, much more of a foregone conclusion.... The fight will never be in practice between equal sides, never be that theoretical deadlock....but a fight between the more inventive and the more traditional" (p204-5). The more efficient state would win.

Such a scenario, derived from Wells's colonial war and possibly his Darwinist assumptions, was of course possible; and was also effective propaganda against obsolescence and for reform. Nevertheless — though he had claimed that consideration of the future should include consideration of alternative possibilities — he failed to consider that one side might not have the necessary decisive air superiority; that in wars between great powers — with great resources and both sides prepared — two sides could use technology; that technological innovation could be followed by technological countermeasures — in effect, a more sophisticated replication of the gun-versus-armour pattern which had characterised naval weapon—systems for half a century — and that anti-aircraft weapons and defences would be developed, and that neither side might gain the

decisive command of the air, and so that, despite technology and aircraft, there still could be prolonged stalemate and attrition, as Bloch had postulated. Wells's postulation of what one might call a mono-technological war (i.e. only one side decisively using technology) rather than a bi-technological war, was an odd assumption from a man who prided himself on his scientific training and his technological awareness, and knew of foreign, especially German, technological progress. One cannot blame Wells for lacking our hindsight, but his failure to think through his ideas, to ask crucial questions and consider alternative possibilities, has to be considered in evaluating him as a military thinker, and set against the brilliance of what one may, anachronistically for convenience, call his blitzkrieg concept.

In *Anticipations* Wells also, more briefly, considered sea warfare. He claimed battlefleets would consist of lightly-armoured fast ironclads with rams, which would ignore submarines and torpedoes and "fight to ram". Submarines would be "practically blind", dangerous to their crews, and of limited use only for coast defence. Here Wells was not prescient, but obsolete. On ramming, he lagged years behind the experts he had failed to study;⁴¹ and he ignored the development potential of torpedoes and submarines.

Military Writings 1902-1914

Anticipations contained Wells' longest and, arguably, most important writing on war. He returned to the subject in intermittent journalism, and assembled some of his articles in *An Englishman Looks at the World* (1914). They were brief and superficial and added relatively little to *Anticipations*, though he changed some of his earlier views. In part they reflected the much-debated defence controversies of the intervening years, notably over dreadnoughts and compulsory military service. He again argued for a small elite army, and condemned conscription and mass armies, claiming that continental mass armies were largely military fat, not muscle. He had rejected his earlier belief in the offensive — abandoning his blitzkrieg concept — for belief in the superiority of the defensive closer to the Bloch. He claimed that under modern conditions a small force could hold off a greater, and that "The experience of war during the last fifteen years has been to show repeatedly the enormous defensive power of small, scientifically handled bodies of men."⁴² From this he argued for the small elite force, and against the necessity of conscription. However, he did not mention armoured fighting vehicles, or poison gas, or the possibility of airpower overcoming the defence in land warfare. On naval warfare he had been influenced by Sir John Thornycroft. He had abandoned his belief in ramming; condemned dreadnoughts, "obsolescent monsters",⁴³ and advocated torpedo craft — destroyers and submarines — together with aircraft and mines. Such ideas were not original; the concept of torpedo craft making battleships obsolete dated back to the earliest torpedo boats, and was revived in the "Dreadnought" controversy.⁴⁴

Bloch and Tanks

Wells' responses to Bloch's work are crucial to evaluation of Wells as a military

thinker. Wells was familiar with Bloch's work, which was hardly surprising considering Stead's promotion and the press coverage. Wells's military writings were largely a response to Bloch. At the beginning of 'The Land Ironclads', faced with trench war stalemate, the war correspondent exclaimed, "And this is war!" to which the lieutenant replied, "No, it's Bloch". Wells in 1916 admitted that though "a humble disciple of Bloch"⁴⁵ he had too much ignored his teaching and so been wrong in his 1914 wartime journalism. Similarly in *Anticipations*, though influenced by Bloch, he had not been convinced by Bloch's message of the war of stalemate and attrition, and had claimed a fast-moving offensive would succeed. Only later, with his 1912 article, did he change his views and claim the decisive advantage was with the defence. He used this to argue for a small elite army and against conscription, and still did not suggest the Blochian war of stalemate and attrition. When he diverged from Bloch, arguably it was he, not Bloch, who lacked insight and prescience.

Wells' land ironclads and the development of the tank are a significant example of both his insight and prescience and his limitations and exaggerated claims. In his 1903 short story 'The Land Ironclads' he described a successful surprise attack on trenches by land ironclads. Thus he presented armoured fighting vehicles as the solution to the Blochian problem of firepower, trenches and stalemate — a crucial insight. Because of this he later claimed to have invented the idea of the tank, and his land ironclads have since been regarded as evidence of his military prescience. However, he did not invent the concept of an armoured vehicle, nor the principal technical innovation of his ironclad, the pedrail, and it was J.W. Dunne who gave him the idea of the land ironclad. His ironclad was significantly different from, and inferior to, the Great War tank. The ironclad was not tracked and had neither turret nor sponsons, and little firepower. It was very long — over three times the tank's length — and heavy. Its bulk, weight and pedrails would have given it relatively inefficient combat performance. The most that can reasonably be claimed for Wells is that he suggested some form of armoured fighting vehicle — though not the tank — as a solution to the Blochian trench war stalemate, and that he may have, as Liddell Hart claimed, influenced those who developed tanks.⁴⁶ However, tanks could have been and probably were developed without his suggestions. Moreover, as with other of his fictional insights, Wells himself did not see their significance for real war. Before others had developed tanks, he did not demand land ironclads. They were to him just a concept, like cavorite, to be exploited once in fiction. He had rejected them in *Anticipations* and later, in his nonfiction writing on future war, he ignored them. Unlike de Mole he made no proposal to the War Office. In the Great War, even when the trench warfare had set in, he still did not see the significance of his earlier, solely fictional, idea of land ironclads.

He apparently never realised this was a recurring pattern with his fictional insights. However, many years later, in 1940, he commented that in writing *War in the Air* (1908), "though I could work out this argument [i.e. on future war] with complete integrity, I could at the same time treat the whole devastating prospect as a joke, as a preposterous extravaganza.... There was a disconnectedness in my mind. I was not dishonest, but my mind was carrying along two main and mutually incongruous strands".⁴⁷

Conclusion

This paper emphasises the limitations of Wells' military thinking, to correct earlier distortion. Nevertheless, of course, Wells did show military insight and prescience as Dr. Travers and others have described — notably on total war and war changing society — and as Dr. Powers has described, on air warfare.⁴⁸

As a military thinker, Wells was capable of brilliance, as in his blitzkrieg concept, but lacked thoroughness in working out his ideas, in integrating into his schemes possible difficulties and obstacles. His over-reliance on the qualities that brought him success in fiction, on imagination and intuitive insight, but with insufficient knowledge and thinking-through, led to odd inconsistencies in the quality of his writing on future war; for example, his belief in naval and aerial ramming. In *The World Set Free* he foresaw "atomic bombs" but they were carried in a box, primed by biting a stud, and then dropped by hand over the side of the open plane.⁴⁹ He failed to adequately develop his concepts. They remained too much, in his own phrase, "the easy dreaming of a literary man."⁵⁰ Also his use of others' ideas could lead him to brilliant fiction, but his unoriginality cannot be credited a quality in his military thinking; his land ironclads, for example, were based on the ideas of others.

Beatrice Webb noted that he was a "speculator", a gambler in ideas, who threw out loose generalisations and hypotheses without verification or responsibility.⁵¹ Critics noted his vagueness; and his failure to think through and put into practical form his ideas — unlike, for example, de Mole with his armoured fighting vehicle — further modify his quality as a military thinker. His resentment of his social superiors and his fear of the lower classes both distorted his military perception. He presumed neither officers nor rankers had anything to offer him. He did not bother to talk to them or read what they wrote. Yet his own experience was too narrow: neither soldiering nor war.

Wells based his military writing on a very limited, chance accumulation of data and assumptions. In addition to Bloch, he had vague memories of accounts of colonial campaigns — then part of the mental picture of all Englishmen — and, most important, press report and comment on the Boer War: his military writing was largely extrapolation from the press clichés of the Boer War. Nevertheless, such extrapolation could be brilliant, as in his blitzkrieg concept. His interest in new technology — which, however, did not extend to studying weapons such as machine guns — and his consequent cultivation of Dunne and Thornycroft, led him to assimilate some of their ideas: from Dunne, land ironclads and aviation; from Thornycroft, torpedo craft. His ideas were not constant, and in response to external change came shifts in his military writing from 1899 to 1914; but, I suggest, relatively little significant extension of knowledge and understanding. Moreover he dropped, without further consideration, the outstanding achievement of his military thinking in *Anticipations* — his blitzkrieg.

One must try to evaluate Wells in the context of his period, and what is significant about his military writing is how inconsistent and varied in quality it was. His failure to learn and his limitation by assumptions of his time, contributed to that crucial factor in his military writing — his failure to appreciate the insights he expressed in his fiction, and to integrate his fictional ideas with his nonfictional thinking on war. Previous commentators, failing to recognise this — and ignoring

the extent to which he was anticipated by earlier and contemporary speculative fiction writers — have exaggerated his military prescience. By lumping together data selected out of both his fiction and non-fiction and largely ignoring its context — both in Wells's writings and in the assumptions of the period — they have given a false impression of Wells as a military thinker. He suggested, and later rejected or ignored poison gas, armoured fighting vehicles and blitzkrieg. He was a brilliant writer of scientific romance, and an outstanding influence on the social thought of his day. As a military thinker he was a paradox; sometimes brilliant, but flawed by ignorance and a curious partial blindness.

Notes

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1. e.g. *Strand Magazine* LX (1920) 154 quoted in Bernard Bergonzi, *The Early H.G. Wells* (Manchester U.P. 1961) 124; *The Common Sense of War and Peace* (Penguin 1940) 65-71; *Phoenix* (Secker & Warburg 1942) 25.
2. I.F. Clarke, *Voices Prophesying War 1763-1984* (1966, Panther 1970) 90-102.
3. Wells's achievement appears more impressive if isolated from its context in earlier and contemporary speculative fiction. Though excelling in the originality of his vision and the quality of his scientific romances, he was anticipated by other speculative-fiction writers — notably Albert Robida and George Griffith — with air war and bombing, armoured fighting vehicles, atomic bombs and apocalyptic destruction. They also included weapons he essentially ignored: submarines, mines, torpedoes, bacteriological weapons and disintegrator rays. How much he was influenced by earlier speculative action is conjectural. Recent s.f. scholarship has shown his s.f. context: see I.F. Clarke, op.cit. (ed.), Sam Moskowitz, *The Raid of 'le Vengeur' and other stories* (Ferret Fantasy 1974) and (ed.) Peter Nicholls, *The Encyclopedia of Science Fiction* (1979, Granada 1981).
4. Ingvald Raknem, *H.G. Wells and His Critics* (Allen & Unwin 1962) 46.
5. Patrick Parrinder, *H.G. Wells: The Critical Heritage* (Routledge & Kegan Paul 1972) 11, 89.
6. One example was the review in the *Spectator*, a serious defence-minded journal, of *The War in the Air*, which praised it — including for differentiating "the strategic conditions of aerial from ordinary warfare" — but claimed readers would ignore its message and regretted Wells had not written it as a comedy, *Spectator* 12 Dec. 1908, 1002. But see also H.F. Wyatt, 'The Wings of War', *Nineteenth Century and After* LXVI (1909).
7. H.G. Wells, *Anticipations* (Chapman & Hall 1901) 2.

8. *The Passionate Friends* (Macmillan 1913) was Wells's only fiction describing an actual war, the Boer War. It lacked the feel of the war as conveyed by combatants' accounts — concern with the immediate and physical; shortages, thirst, terrain and climate — and the distinctive life of a military unit. Like 'The Land Ironclads' it considered the problem of whether urban civilization was making men too soft for war.
9. He also very briefly considered war in *A Modern Utopia* (Chapman & Hall 1905) and *New Worlds for Old* (Constable 1908). In *Utopia* he described war as contributing to the establishment of Utopia, but did not claim this was necessary on Earth. In *New Worlds* he claimed war resulted from presocialist imperfect society and would be ended by socialism, and that in war a socialist state, because more efficient, would defeat a non-socialist state. In the Second World War, in *Phoenix*, he claimed the British and U.S. losses to the Japanese were the defeat of the capitalist system, and contrasted them with Soviet success against Germany.
10. George Orwell, 'Wells, Hitler and the World State' (1941) in (ed.) Sonia Orwell and Ian Angus, *The Collected Essays, Journalism and Letters of George Orwell* (1968, Penguin 1970) II:169.
11. (ed.) Gordon N. Ray, H.G. Wells, *The Desert Daisy* (1957 Beta Phi Mu, Urbana, Illinois). Wells also wrote another, similar schoolboy story 'The Battle for Bungledom', Norman & Jeanne Mackenzie, *The Time Traveller* (Weidenfeld & Nicholson 1973) 49.
12. *The Desert Daisy* XV.
13. H. Spenser Wilkinson, *Lessons of the War* (Constable 1900), Arnold White, *Efficiency and Empire* (Methuen 1901).
14. H.G. Wells, 'The Cyclist Soldier', *Fortnightly Review* LXVIII NS (Dec. 1900).
15. Eustace Balfour, 'Military Cycling, after Mr. H.G. Wells', *Fortnightly Review* LXIX NS (Feb. 1901).
16. H.G. Wells, 'The Soldier Cyclist', *Fortnightly Review* LXIX NS (Mar. 1901).
17. Letter to J.B. Pinker 6/2/01 quoted in (ed.) Harris Wilson, *Arnold Bennett and H.G. Wells* (Hart-Davis 1960) 63.
18. This theme he later repeated, e.g. *Phoenix* 26, 36-8.
19. He condemned senior officers of the Great War in *The Outline of History* (George Newnes 1920) claiming "the professional military mind is by necessity an inferior and unimaginative mind", *Experiment in Autobiography* (Gollancz 1934) and *The Fate of Homo Sapiens* (Secker & Warburg 1939). For evidence supporting Wells on senior officers and technological innovation, see David Divine, *The Blunted Sword* (Hutchinson 1964), J.T. Sumida, 'British Capital Ship Design and Fire Control in the Dreadnought Era', *J. Modern History* 51 (June 1979) and Anthony Pollen, *The Great Gunnery Scandal* (Collins 1980).
20. He used the term 'Blimp' in his Second World War criticism of British senior officers e.g. in *The Common Sense of War and Peace* (Penguin 1940) and *Phoenix*. In 1941 he condemned British generals as "antiquated, dull and prejudiced" and demanded a purge of them. *Phoenix* 29-30. Orwell noted his hostility to officers, and he was especially hostile to officer or ex-officer leaders e.g. Churchill and de Gaulle. both of whom he compared to Hitler, W. Warren Wagar, *H.G. Wells: Journalism and Prophecy 1893-1946* (Bodley Head 1964) 257, 260-6.
21. Though he did not admit this failure with military subjects, he did with philosophy. In 1905 he admitted disregarding "the fact that a whole literature.... was already in existence", *A Modern Utopia* (Chapman & Hall 1905) 362. He wrote in the introduction to the 1914 edition of *Anticipations*, "there are ignorances....but....moments of leaping ignorance are in the blood of H.G. Wells" (vi-viii).
22. *Phoenix* 29-30.
23. Balfour 302.
24. He apparently never saw the significance of this. In *Phoenix* he described his World War I visits to the front and claimed the real horror of war was that it bored (36).
25. T.H.E. Travers, 'Future Warfare: H.G. Wells and British Military Theory' in (ed.) Brian Bond & Ian Roy, *War and Society: A Yearbook* (Croom Helm 1976.) 67.
26. Beatrice Webb, diary 25 October 1934, quoted in Mackenzie 385.
27. *The War that Will End War* (Frank & Cecil Palmer 1914). He claimed the French were superior to the Germans in modern war, "the German is not naturally a good soldier"; the German army was twenty years out of date; the war would probably end that winter or in 1915; and that "within three months from now the Tricolour will be over the Rhine". In 1916 he attributed his "unfortunate prophesying" to his failure to sufficiently heed Bloch, *What is Coming?* (Cassell 1916), Wagar 70.
28. *Guide to the New World* (Gollancz 1941) quoted Orwell 166-7.
29. '42 to '44 (Secker & Warburg 1944) 106, 131.
30. Spenser Wilkinson, *War and Policy* (Constable 1900) and *Lessons of the War* (Constable 1900): Arnold White, *Efficiency and Empire* (Methuen 1901).
31. Charles Wentworth Dilke, *The British Army* (Chapman & Hall 1888).
32. White 249.
33. Raknem 277.
34. Hugh Cunningham, *The Volunteer Force* (Croom Helm 1975) 84-6.
35. Travers 68.
36. Arthur Conan Doyle, *The Great Boer War* (Smith, Elder 1901) 516-7, 531; Travers 70; Travers, 'The Offensive and the Problem of Innovation in British Military Thought 1870-1975', *J. Contemporary History*. Vol. 13 No 3 (July 1978) 541.
37. Bloch (1836-1902) published his six-volume *The War of the Future* (1897) in Russian. The sixth volume was published in England in 1899 as *Modern*

Weapons and Modern War. See J.F.C. Fuller, *The Conduct of War 1789-1961* (Methuen 1972) 128-30, and T.H.E. Travers, 'Technology, Tactics and Morale: Jean de Bloch, the Boer War, and British Military Theory, 1900-1914', *J. Modern History* 51 (June 1979).

38. H.H.R. Bailes, 'The Influence of continental examples and colonial warfare upon the reform of the late Victorian army' (unpublished Ph.D. thesis, London University 1980) 15-18; Travers (1979) 270-3, 282-4. Colonel F.N. Maude (1854-1933) was a leading military controversialist, an extreme Prussian-influenced 'continentalist' and leading opponent of Bloch's doctrines, especially in firepower. In *The New Battle of Dorking* (Grant Richards 1900) he asserted the effectiveness of infantry and cavalry close-order charges, that rifle bullets (other than dum-dum, which he advocated) could not stop cavalry, and that a lance wound was more lethal than that of a modern bullet.
39. I.S. Bloch, *Modern Weapons and Modern War* (Grant Richards 1900) xxxi.
40. ib xxx.
41. W. Laird Clowes, 'The Ram, in Action and in Accident', *J.R.U.S.I.* XXXVIII, March 1894; F.C.D. Sturdee, 'The tactics best adapted for developing the power of existing ships and weapons', *ibid.* April 1894, Rammings, so dramatic and decisive, was a recurring theme in future-war fiction, e.g. H.O. Arnold-Forster, *In a Conning Tower* (1888) and the Earl of Mayo, *The War Cruise of the 'Aries'* (1894). In *The War of the Worlds* (1877) the torpedo-ram 'Thunder Child' destroyed two Martians. She was presumably modelled on the ram 'Polyphemus' (1881) which aroused much interest and press coverage (e.g. *Illustrated London News* 25 June 1881) and had a more distinguished fictional than actual career, fighting the French in three fictional wars; in W.L. Clowes and C.N. Robinson, *The Great Naval War of 1887* (1887), P. Colomb et al, *The Great War of 189 — (1893)* and Mayo, *op.cit.*
42. 'The Common Sense of Warfare' (1912), in *An Englishman Looks at the World* (Cassell 1914) 135.
43. *Ibid* 138-40. Wells later criticised the Navy and its dreadnought policy in '42 to '44 104-10.
44. A.J. Marder, *The Anatomy of British Sea Power* (Putnam 1941) 124; E.H.H. Archibald, *The Metal Fighting Ship in the Royal Navy 1860-1970* (Blandford 1971) 51.
45. Wagar 70.
46. P.H. Liddell Hart, *The Tanks* (Cassell 1959) 15-16.
47. *The Common Sense of War and Peace*, 66. See also *The Fate of Homo Sapiens* 82-5.
48. Barry D. Powers, *Strategy Without Slide-rule: British Air Strategy 1914-1939* (Croom Helm 1976) 107-10. However Dr. Powers ignored the extent to which Wells was anticipated and influenced by other speculative fiction writers on aerial warfare, and especially George Griffith. Griffith, in *The Angel of the Revolution* (Tower Publishing 1893) and later fiction, described war transformed and dominated by airpower: bombing with explosives and poison gas, a

form of blitzkrieg, airpower causing cataclysmic destruction and finally enforcing a world peace, a pax aeronautica. Wells read Griffith but did not acknowledge his influence. Nevertheless Wells's aerial warfare writings are apparently largely derivative from Griffith. By the late nineteenth century some officers also predicted airpower, e.g. Lt. Col. Elsdale, 'The Evolution of the Art of War', *United Services Mag.* (Sept. 1895), cited by John Gooch, *The Prospect of War* (Frank Cass 1981) 40. The subject of Wells and airwar deserves fuller treatment.

49. *The World Set Free* (Macmillan 1914) 108. Others wrote fiction of atomic war, also erroneous: for example, the atomic rifles in George Griffith, *The Lord of Labour* (F.V. White 1911) written 1906.
50. 'The Argonauts of the Air' (1895), *Selected Short Stories* (Penguin 1976) 219.
51. Beatrice Webb, *Our Partnership* (Longmans 1948) 289, 359.

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The Man Who Loved Morlocks

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David Lake is a novelist and Wells scholar at the University of Queensland. Here he offers a sequel to *The Time Machine* in which the Time Traveller is cured of his irrational aversion to the Morlocks, who, it seems, were not cannibals after all. Our hero settles down in the year 999,480 with a warrior princess — which is why, as the "Putney romancer" put it, he never returned. An appendix shows his first visit, to the year 802,701, through Morlock eyes. This is an enjoyable and sophisticated romance based on a vigilant reading of *The Time Machine*, and one hopes it will find a British and American publisher. The book is handsomely illustrated by Steph Cambell.