

**BOOK REVIEW:** Steven McLean, *The Early Fiction of H. G. Wells: Fantasies of Science* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2009) ISBN: 978-0-230-53562-6, (HB) £50.00. [Simon J. James]

For all of the variousness of Wells's output it continues to be Wells's early scientific romances that continue to attract most attention from his readers. Steve McLean's *The Early Fiction of H. G. Wells: Fantasies of Science* is thus sure to command an audience – and this largely meticulously researched and very fluently written study certainly deserves one.

Many members will be familiar with this former Secretary's profile-raising work for the Wells Society, as well as with the sections of this book published before in our now sadly deceased sister publication *The Undying Fire*, and with McLean's collection *H. G. Wells: Interdisciplinary Essays* (in which, to declare an interest, this reviewer benefited from McLean's detailed and knowledgeable editing). The focus of this volume, respectfully following scholars such as John R. Reed, Rosylnn D. Haynes and others, is Wells's engagement through his early romances with scientific discourse. McLean's definition of his topic, though, is impressively up to date in not seeing 'science' as a monologic voice of truth but as a contested field, which meant many different things to different people, and spoke with far from a single voice. Much of the intellectual legwork for this study has been conducted in the valuable resource of the Victorian periodical, too often an unappealing and under-read field of enquiry in literary studies – although not this one. Wells's declaration to James, Geoffrey West and others that he was more of a 'journalist' than an artist has never quite been met with the seriousness it warrants: taking the appellation more literally allows McLean to show how the work of scientific writers such as John Barlow, Henry Maudsley, Herbert Spencer, H. W. Wilson, Ernst Haeckel, R. L. Garner, John Tyndall, John Lubbock, Charles Howard Henderson and W. A. Chapple, 'the social implications of science' (4) itself, and Wells's own writing are woven together within the fabric of late-Victorian intellectual culture, especially its journalism. The received image of Wells first as a romancer is not necessarily the most accurate one; *The Early Fiction of H. G. Wells* contests that 'the conception of Wells as something of a "founding father" of science fiction has worked to obscure the extent to which his early work is grounded in the discourses of contemporary science' (2). Instead, this monograph chooses persuasively to focus 'on the relationship between science and fiction – rather than on science fiction' (189).

The ways in which the history of ideas is threaded through Wells's imaginative work is perhaps the most impressive aspect of *The Early Fiction of H. G. Wells*. The notion of 'extrapolation' proves especially productive, since Wells's imagination was rarely shackled by what Victorian science only empirically believed and asserted to be the case: in fact, one of the revisions made by McLean's thesis is, surprisingly, the somewhat intermittent nature of Wells's engagement with science, even in early stages of his career. As in the best critical

monographs, a story is told: one sees a clear picture of the mind of the author considering, developing, changing, both reading and writing itself into different kinds of imaginative formulations. McLean begins, of course, with *The Time Machine*, showing how the text's engagement with the open-ended nature of biological evolution extends as far as the Time Traveller himself, as he refashions a new rationality in order to avoid madness. (McLean overstates, perhaps, the supposed critical neglect of seeing this text as in dialogue with its utopian and dystopian forebears, however). *The Island of Doctor Moreau* is also seen as concerned with the rewriting of epistemology, 'the inscription and transgression of boundaries' (43), conducted through this romance's preoccupation with questions of language; Prendick, like the Time Traveller is not only an observer of evolutionary processes, but also subject to them.

McLean quite correctly stresses Wells's lifelong commitment to 'an understanding of scientific method in the educational process' (70). His stylish reading of *The Invisible Man* takes as its main concern the nature of evidence, and Wells's thinking around more accurate ways of reading such. This chapter is excellent on signs, observation and interpretation, as if this book (a romance, not 'novel' as McLean slips once or twice in referring to his primary material) had been written by Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, whose Sherlock Holmes had first appeared the decade before. In a chapter wittily entitled, 'The Descent of Mars', discussion of *The War of the Worlds* is matched with the relevant discussion in *Pearson's Magazine*, in which *The War of the Worlds* was serialised, of military reforms – once again showing how Wells draws on scientific discoveries or speculations to question forms of knowledge previously taken for granted; here, 'the ethics of evolution, or perhaps, the evolution of ethics' (89). This reading makes telling use of variant texts of the primary material – since McLean is so illuminating every time he does this, it made me wish that he did so more often.

Like Wells himself, this book becomes more interested in politics as it goes on, and the third section opens with the most lucid exposition of the relationship between *The First Men in the Moon* and Wells's social writing that I have yet read. McLean shows himself an attentive formal critic as well as an able interdisciplinarian in correctly placing the narrative tone of *A Modern Utopia* as more speculative, ambiguous, and ironical than dogmatic, reaching the surprising conclusion that 'Wells cannot endorse the Utopia his protagonists visit' (8). Here the story ends. Given the book's stress upon such figures as T. H. Huxley and Francis Galton, it might perhaps have benefited from further engagement with some of the work recently conducted on Wells's political thought, and his views on eugenics, race and gender. A discussion, had time, opportunity or publisher perhaps allowed, of the place of individuality and social organisation in the world of *When the Sleeper Wakes*, or of accidental and intentional evolution in *The Food of the Gods*, would not by any means be out of place as a coda to this nonetheless highly impressive achievement.

A certain dutifulness in acknowledgement of other secondary sources very occasionally betrays the origins of this book as a PhD thesis: a stronger sense of where the investigations of others have come to a stop, and where McLean's own work picks up the thread might have made more of the virtues this study so clearly possesses. From *The Time Machine* and *Anticipations* onwards, Wells insisted not only on the importance of specialisation but also of specialists possessing the capacity to read and write in other disciplines besides their own. As academic research, perhaps especially literary criticism, begins to heed Wells's call, work such as *The Early of Fiction H. G. Wells* opens up further lines of enquiry, new ways of reading and thinking about both Wells and science itself.