

Book Review: New Futures for Old

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W. Warren Wagar *A Short History of the Future* 2nd edition (London: Adamantine Press, 1992) £13.50

In 1961 Bernard Bergonzi set about reviving Wells's reputation as a creative artist by focusing attention exclusively on the early scientific romances. In *The Early H. G. Wells* he contrasted these mythopoeic fantasies with Wells's later efforts as a thinker and propagandist, which he considered to be "radically immature" in their subordination of artistic integrity to the demands of naive social idealism. *The Shape of Things to Come* was singled out by him as a particularly rich example of Wells's folly: "a work which contains flashes of genuine imaginative invention, but is largely vitiated by the banality and naivety of its underlying conception."

In the same year, W. Warren Wagar published *H. G. Wells and the World State*, a largely sympathetic account of Wells's utopian socialism. The debate between what we might call the literary and the political admirers of Wells had been initiated through what remain two of the best books on the subject, and the terms of the debate have changed little since. The published version of the H. G. Wells Society's 1986 international symposium - *H. G. Wells Under Revision*, edited by Patrick Parrinder and Christopher Rolfe (published by Associated University Presses, 1990) - features an opening double-act in which Brian Aldiss largely restates Bergonzi's argument, while Warren Wagar, still on the case a quarter of a century later, reaffirms the continuing value of Wells's political ideas. "His central conviction, that civilization would collapse unless the right sort of people got hold of it and replaced the system of sovereign nation-states with a secular and socialist world polity, is correct." Wagar does, however, dissociate himself from what he sees as Wells's faith in technocracy, and accordingly suggests that some updating of Wells's ideas is in

order. We cannot be saved by science alone, because science cannot answer political questions.

While science may show us how to do things, it cannot tell us what we should do. We need therefore more active, democratic types of education and politics than Wells seems to have envisaged if we are going to achieve a workable consensus, capable of sustaining a global civilization and preventing the self-destruction of the human species.

Wagar has taken this line of thinking further in two recent books for the Adamantine Press series 'Studies on the 21st Century.' Their titles - *A Short History of the Future* (1989) and *The Next Three Futures: Paradigms of Things to Come* (1992) - clearly echo Wells's inter-war diptych, *A Short History of the World* and *The Shape of Things to Come* (together with the cruder film version, *Things to Come*). The first of these two books, *A Short History of the Future*, has now appeared in a revised 1992 version, prompted, as the author ruefully admits in his foreword, by the sudden end of the Cold War and the breakup of the Soviet bloc. "As a rule we enter the future one day at a time. In 1989-91, fifty years worth came all at once." He goes on to explain that in any case his aim, like that of Wells, was not to predict the future, but to offer a mixture of warnings, hopes and speculations.

This mixture is stirred together by one Peter Jensen, an inhabitant of the future looking back with hindsight for the benefit of his grand-daughter. His account falls into three sections. Firstly, capitalism unifies the world along corporate lines, but fails to cope with problems such as pollution, crime, the unbalanced distribution of wealth and the proliferation of nuclear weaponry, leading to the outbreak of World War III. The second section tells how civilisation is rebuilt on collectivist principles by a "World Party" of Wellsian open-conspirators. The scenario is not unlike that of *Things to Come*, though showing more awareness of environmental issues via plans for ecological reclamation and population control. In turn the global conformity of the World Party is superseded by the pluralism of the Small Party which, in the third

section, dismantles socialist institutions and decentralises power. Toward the end of the book, experiments in genetics, robotics and spaceflight begin to move us away from what we might think of as human history altogether.

These ideas will have a familiar ring to readers of *The World Set Free* and *The Shape of Things to Come*, and I'm sure many will welcome such a restatement and revision of what to a large degree remains recognisable as Wells's vision. In doing so, however, they may recall the problems which Wells had in devising an appropriate form for such works, and wonder whether Professor Wagar has fared any better. In other words, this kind of book is always in danger of falling between two objectives. Unlike a history of the past, a history of the future cannot call upon existing interest in the details of its period, and cannot consider particular personalities and events in depth without looking foolishly disproportionate. If, on the other hand, the author does try to enliven the narrative with colourful characters and short-term plot developments, it is impossible to sustain them for long and difficult to prevent them getting in the way of the real aims of the book. For all his creative genius, Wells never found the right balance between the general and the particular, the historical and the novelistic, for the length of an entire book of this sort, and not surprisingly nor does Professor Wagar.

Clearly he is aware of the problem because he makes serious efforts to overcome it. Although the main narrative of his future history lacks the vivid incidents and fierce political debate which would accompany such historical developments in real life, compensatory human interest and debate is tacked on through the device of ending each chapter with a series of letters. It's a good notion, but I must confess I never succeeded in mustering interest in the correspondence for very long. As in Wells's works, I found myself wishing that the author had managed to bring something of the spirit of Rabelais, Swift or Peacock to his task, an element of joy in his own audacity, a willingness to put a satirical spin on some of his ideas. Again Wagar makes some attempt to do this: for example through the oil

shiekh Faroukh-al-Khalidi who turns out to be a masquerading American oil executive Frank Calhoun, or the deceased twenty-first century Belgian performance artist "whose final work was his own flayed skin, tattooed from forehead to foot with an obscenely garbled version of the *Discourse on Method* of Rene Descartes." But the need for a sober tone to underwrite the seriousness and authority of the project inhibits embellishment and such promising episodes are quickly absorbed into the smooth texture of academic historiography.

As a 'good read,' then, Wagar's *Short History of the Future* does have limitations. However, it may be perverse of me to consider it from such a point of view. Taken on its own terms, as a thought-provoking piece of speculation, based on a thorough knowledge of earlier works in the field and developed with painstaking intelligence, it clearly has considerable merits. I have little doubt that, if he were alive today, Wells would be more than happy to endorse it as a volume well worth investigating as we enter the next millenium.