

“In your case, this had the following effects. In the Virtual History of 1975 which you activated, the elected leader of the British Conservative Party was Willie Whitelaw, not Margaret Thatcher. Willie Whitelaw became Prime Minister in 1979. He did not adopt ‘Thatcherite’ policies, and continued to maintain the political consensus about the welfare state. The Falklands War did not occur in 1982, or at any later time. In the usual swing of British politics, Michael Foot was elected Prime Minister in 1983, then there was a further Willie Whitelaw Government in 1987. As a result, the Thatcherite extremities of rich and poor never appeared. The ‘underclass’ never emerged. The criminal elements, who, in the previous branch of Virtual History, increasingly dominated and terrorised the ‘underclass’, never had a chance to gain power. In the previous branch, it was they who eventually evolved into the Morlocks. The affluent rich of the late 1990s gradually lost their power, and evolved into the Eloi.’

“The Time Traveller paused for a moment to take in this breath-taking scenario. He watched at the console of the great Virtual Reality Computer, on whose screen amazing dynamic patterns appeared, a supercomplex interplay of deterministic and random influences. He saw multicoloured whirling random spirals cascade across the screen, like veritable ‘Catherine Wheels of Chance’. Before he could ask his next question, a quiet, gentle young woman said to him with great affection: ‘Do you not recognise me? I was Weena!’ They embraced and kissed each other passionately.”

[The next issue of the *Wellsian* (1997) will present Part II of “The Virtual Time Machine”. This paper will provide an up-dated theoretical explanation of the ideas which inspired this extension of Wells’s *The Time Machine*, together with detailed documentation of the relevant scientific sources.]

Tom Miller

## The War in the Air: A Study in Plotting

A visit to Niagara in 1994 stimulated a reconsideration of *The War in the Air*, one of Wells’s most entertaining scientific romances. In order to explain my conclusions, I must rehearse the plot of the book, which may not be familiar to all Wellsians, though it was dramatized successfully for radio in the early 1950s.

The novel, which was first published in 1908, is set in the then future, probably in an imaginary 1920. Though by this fictitious date there had been plenty of mechanical progress since the historical 1908, the advance of flying has been slower than the public has been led to expect. On the other hand, in Wells’s world, a gyroscopic monorail has been invented, and this speeds up travel.

The opening scenes of the book are located in Bun Hill, which is presumably Bromley, a suburb that forms an important junction on the monorail system. Wells uses his introductory passages to give a rough outline of the impact of “progress” on ordinary people, and his Smallways family is very ordinary. Mr Tom Smallways is a greengrocer, whose younger brother, Bert, the central character and an obvious minimised self-portrait, works with a bicycle shop-owner named Grubb. Talk of flying causes Grubb and Bert to put up a sign, “Aeroplanes made and repaired” (11). This sign is intended humorously by the characters, and is treated as such by the reader, but Wells is hinting at something. At one point, a soldier in a pub tells Bert that governments are experimenting with aerial fighting machines. The coming of war is thus suggested.

Grubb and Bert fail to make a success of the shop, and depart for Dymchurch to entertain holidaymakers with their singing. They take little notice of the threats of war that fill the newspapers. (Wells intelligently anticipates the prewar atmosphere of 1914.) At Dymchurch, a balloon in some difficulty descends on the beach. This carries the aeronautical inventor, Alfred Butteridge and his mistress. Butteridge - “fierce eyebrows, a flattish nose, a huge black moustache” (62) - is a good comic character almost certainly based on Frank Harris,

The lady faints. In a fine piece of burlesque, Wells has Butteridge wanting to get her out of the balloon’s wickerwork car. The lady recovers consciousness when

Butteridge, seated with Bert on the brim of the car, is trying to heave her out. Grabbing Butteridge, she pushes him, unintentionally, off the edge of the car. The drastic reduction of the car's weight serves to propel Bert, who falls inside the car, into the sky and over the English Channel when the balloon takes off.

These events introduce the book's political story. Bert lands in Franconia, where a great German Zeppelin fleet is just about to take off to attack the US. The Germans are commanded by Prince Karl Albert, who is probably a treatment of Kaiser Wilhelm II. The Germans think to start with, that Bert is Butteridge and they are interested in the plans for his flying machine that they find in the balloon. So they take him along with them on the raid, and after they discover his true identity they decide to keep him as ballast.

Bert sees some astonishing sights. The German and American navies fight a prodigious battle in the North Atlantic; the Germans win easily because of the hope given to their fleet by the airships. The airships then devastate New York after negotiating its surrender fail. The Germans seem to have won the war, but they are then confronted by a new and more powerful enemy. Another air fleet, prepared in secret by the Chinese and Japanese, attacks the Pacific shore of the US, crosses the continent, and then defeats the Germans. However, the Asiatic coalition is in its turn brought down by revolutions at home, and the world descends into anarchy as currencies lose their value, law and order break down, and a depression takes hold. The story has points in common with what actually did happen in the World Wars, though Wells overestimates the damage that pre-nuclear aerial bombing could achieve, and underrates the strength of the banking and political systems.)

Bert moves to Goat Island, which stands between the two falls at Niagara, while he is watching the air battle above. With great difficulty, as a Zeppelin has crashed on the bridge that connects the island with the American bank and destroys it, he gets off the island and eventually makes his way home to a ruined Bun Hill, where he shoots the local boss and takes his place. The final scene is set in about 1950. The economy has receded to its condition in, perhaps, 1400. Old Tom Smallways is telling his little nephew about the days before the war, with considerable stress on the abundance of food in 1920.

So much for the story. In the absence of relevant published diary entries and letters by Wells, it is worth trying to reconstruct his mode of thinking when planning the book, which, at least in retrospect, he took seriously, as we may judge from the fact that he wrote "I told you so" prefaces in 1921 and 1941. We know that Wells visited

the US in 1906 and went to Niagara. From the evidence of *The War in the Air*, Wells must have spent a lot of time on Goat Island, and appears to have made copious notes on its topography. At about the time of his going there, he decided to dramatize a general warning of the consequences of a major war. One likely result of a war of this size was starvation. Wells hints at this by calling a minor character Grubb. The reader takes the point that a hero cannot be called Grubb, so Grubb is a secondary personality, but misses the implication signalled by the fact that the word "grub" can be used as slang for food. The name stresses the importance of food. The reader is thus softened up for world starvation later.

The best central character for dramatization was a "little man" on the lines of Hoopdriver, Kipps or Lewisham. Thus the creation of Bert Smallways - the name, of course, hints at narrow thinking, but Bert's eventual success suggests that the little man has a greater potential than he realises. The technical problem was to project Bert into amazing situations, and then to develop him so that he can end the book with quasi-heroic status.

Getting Bert onto a Zeppelin presented Wells with a plotting difficulty. This was solved by introducing Mr Butteridge and his balloon. The improbability of the episode is covered by the comic writing, which distracts the reader. At Niagara, Wells noted the potential of Goat Island once the bridge is down. It is impossible to get off Goat Island by rowing or swimming - as would be the case with most islands - because the force of the torrents would sweep an oarsman or swimmer to instant death. The reader's attention, like Bert's, is on the aerial battle and he does not notice how big a risk Bert has taken by going to Goat Island. Bert then engages in a lethal and successful game, exciting in itself, of hide-and-seek with Prince Karl Albert and another German character. He gets off the island by repairing a damaged Asiatic flying machine, a primitive light aeroplane - not for nothing, as Wells has already hinted, has he made his hero a bicycle mechanic, an individual who could be expected to know how to repair a simple aircraft.

*The War in the Air* is not a major work of science fiction, because no thrilling new scientific ideas are presented. It is still, however, a readable book, and an analysis of its structure should serve to remind Wellsians of the technical competence of the author. Wells displays a striking capacity to slip in the "plant" - the hint that will be developed later - and a mastery of inequality of emphasis, by which I mean stress on the really important elements of the story.

### Works Cited

Wells, H.G. *The War in the Air: And particularly how Mr Bert Smallways fared while it lasted.* London: George Bell & Sons, 1908.