

THE WAR IN THE AIR: A STUDY IN PLOTTING

by Tom Miller

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 dramatised 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 leads to Grubb and Bert putting up a sign, "Aeroplanes made and repaired". The characters intend the sign to be humorous, and the reader treats it in this way, 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, therefore, suggested.

Grubb and Bert fail to make a success of the shop, and they depart for Dymchurch to entertain holidaymakers with their singing. They take little notice of the threats of war that fill then newspapers. (Wells intelligently anticipates the pre-war atmosphere of 1914.) At Dymchurch, a balloon, in some difficulty, descends on the beach. This carries the aeronautical inventor, Alfred Butteridge – "fierce eyebrows, a flattish nose, a huge black moustache" – a good comic character, almost certainly based on Frank Harris, and his companion is probably based on Harris's mistress. The lady faints. In a fine piece of burlesque, Wells has Butteridge wanting to get her out of the balloon's wickerwork car. Bert helps by sitting on the edge of the car, to weigh it down. The lady recovers consciousness when Butteridge, seated with Bert on the brim of the car, tries 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 into 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 United States. 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 a flying machine that they find in the balloon, so they take him along with them on the raid, and decide to keep him, as ballast, when they discover his true identity. Bert sees some astonishing sights. The German and American navies fight a prodigious battle in the North Atlantic, the Germans winning easily because of the help given to their fleet by the airships. The airships then devastate New York after negotiations for 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, depression takes hold and law and order break down. (The story parallels to some extent what actually did happen in the World Wars, though Wells overestimates the damage that pre-nuclear aerial bombing could do, and underrates the strength of the banking and political systems.)

Bert moves to Goat Island, which stands between the two falls at Niagara, all the time 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 destroyed 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 plenty of 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 as he planned the book – a 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 United States 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 must have made careful notes of its topography. At about the time of his going there, he decided to dramatise 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 this is a secondary personality, but may well miss the implication signalled by the fact that the word "grub" can be used as slang for "food". The name stresses the importance of food and the reader is prepared for the world starvation which comes later in the book.

The best central character for the dramatisation 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, by the end of the book, acquire quasi-heroic status. Getting Bert into a Zeppelin presented Wells with a plotting difficulty. This was solved by introducing Mr Butteridge and his balloon. The improbability of the incident is disguised by the funny writing, which distracts the reader. At Niagara, Wells noticed the melodramatic potential of Goat Island – once the bridge is down it is impossible to get off Goat Island, as in the case of an ordinary island in a river, by rowing or swimming, 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 that, by going to Goat Island, Bert is taking a large risk. 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 suggested, has Bert been 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, readable, and analysis of its structure should serve to remind Wellsians of the technical competence of the author. Wells displays an alarming 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.