

Writing through Armageddon

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Cecil D. Eby *The Road to Armageddon: The Martial Spirit in English Popular Literature 1870 - 1914* Durham and London (Duke University Press) 1988, 280 pp £25.00

Peter Buitenhuis *The Great War of Words: British, American and Canadian Propaganda and Fiction 1914 - 1933* Vancouver (University of British Columbia Press) 1987, 199 pp £25.65

Since the Great War much has been written on the origins of the war and of the prewar mentality. One of the latest additions to this flourishing genre is by a Professor of English at the University of Michigan, Cecil D. Eby's *The Road to Armageddon*: an attractively-produced book, well-illustrated. He argues that in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries the British were, through popular literature, indoctrinated with nationalism, xenophobia and militarism which, though not causing the war, created the climate of opinion which welcomed it in 1914. He covers an enormous subject, including Wells, the fiction of future war, Baden-Powell and the Boy Scout movement, the public schools and the cult of games, Barrie and *Peter Pan*, Conan Doyle, Kipling, Rupert Brooke and finally the British response to the Great War. There is much of interest, including the Kaiser's alleged jealousy of Edward VII's dog, and that Rupert Brooke's favourite play was *Peter Pan*, which he saw ten times. Professor Eby considers Wells's writings from *The War of the Worlds* to 1914. He is largely critical, describing *The War in the Air* as "little more than a slapdash application of feckless characterisation, preposterous plot, and authorial harangue," and dismissing the conclusion to *Little Wars* as "absurd." He has not used the Wells Archive, only published sources. Students of Wells will find no new data, but interpretations as above, which they can well evaluate.

Most of the book is not on Wells, but could be of interest to Wellsians wanting to contextualise Wells. They should, however, use it with caution. Professor Eby has little liking for those of whom he writes: for him British patriotism is alien and incomprehensible. He is unsympathetic and contemptuous. In the tradition of F.W. Hirst, Caroline Playne and A.J.A. Morris, he assumes the 'scaremongers' were irrational and wrong. This is questionable. One of the paradoxes

of British popular historiography is the condemnation of both the pre-1939 'appeasers' and the pre-1914 anti-appeasers. The 'scaremongers' may have been mistaken but, knowing what they did, they were neither unreasonable nor wicked. Eby ignores the evidence of Wilhelmine Germany. In dismissing the invasionists, he ignores the possibility of new weapon technology nullifying British naval supremacy: significantly his account of Chesney's *Battle of Dorking* omits "the fatal engines which sent our ships, one after the other, to the bottom" and so made possible the invasion. He also ignores the fact that both the French and the German authorities did make plans for invading England, as Howard Moon has shown in his much-cited London PhD thesis on the invasion issue.

As the quotations on Wells show, Professor Eby judges harshly. He also condemns, for example, Rupert Brooke's poetry. His criteria are seldom explicit and are apparently usually ideological. However, accuracy is among them, for he condemns works as "slapdash" and "slipshod." How does his book measure by these latter criteria: is it to the standard of scholarship one can reasonably expect from a work written by a professor and published by a university press? He states that G.A. Henty went as a journalist to the Crimea, that *The Great War of 189-* was "an attempt by Whitehall," that Joseph Chamberlain was prime minister in 1900 and was the Ineptitude in Saki's *Westminster Alice*, that Lansdowne "briefly headed both the War Office and the Foreign Office," that it was Roberts' orders to White which Saki criticised, that Sherlock Holmes "in many cases ... allows the villain to go scot-free," that Conan Doyle's *Great Boer War* was "a massive tome," that after the Boer War Roberts was voted a million pounds, that before 1914 the English used pound notes, that Wells played with tin soldiers, and that today Kipling's work "is not well known, even among academics." He ignores Bloch and so misses the allusion in his Saki quotation and exaggerates Wells's originality on war in *Anticipations*. He claims it is "debatable" whether life was worse at an English prep school or on the Western Front. He mistakes the meaning of "martinet" and "futurist" and writes of an "inflatable airship", implying he knows of an uninflatable one (a lead zeppelin?). He is also unacquainted with the *Wellsian*, where he could have found articles germane to his subject.

Another North American work covering Wells and the Great War is by a Professor of English at Simon Fraser University, Peter Buitenhuis's *The Great War of Words*. From extensive reading and research, he describes the role of British and North American writers in wartime propaganda and their responses to the Great War, in their lives and writings, during and after it. He describes the organisation

of British and of United States propaganda, and the work of leading writers, including Bennett, Conan Doyle, Hueffer, Kipling and Wells. He describes some writers falsifying the facts of British bungling, losses and defeat: notably John Buchan's presentation of the Somme disaster, when we lost in a single day 20,000 of our finest men, as a victory. He notes contemporary criticism of excessively optimistic writers, notably Hilaire Belloc. In 1915 a book was published entitled *What I know About the War By Blare Hilloc*: its pages were blank. Buitenhuis is appreciative of Wells's *The World Set Free* and *Mr Britling*, but critical of Wells's writings in support of the War, and of *Joan and Peter* and *The Bulpington of Blup*. He tellingly quotes Graves on Wells's opinionated ignorance, after a 'Cook's Tour' of the Front, of the reality of trench warfare. He also cites a significant document now in the PRO, Wells's secret 'Memorandum on the General Principles of Propaganda' (21 March 1918), advocating terrifying German civilians by rumours that Britain intended to use "poison bombs of a peculiar malignancy." Buitenhuis amplifies and corrects Wells's own account of his propaganda role in *Experiment in Autobiography*. He claims that British propaganda was effective at home and in America, and that the writers made a major contribution to this. His book has far fewer errors than Professor Eby's. He misnames the National Service League, confuses cavalry and mounted infantry and wrongly claims the British government could have prevented the War by open support for Russia and France. He is also erroneous on *Stalky and Co*, Lloyd George and Haig, and Asquith. The photograph captioned 'H.G. Wells' is of Eden Philpotts! Nevertheless, the book is a contribution to scholarship, which should be read by every serious student of the Great War and of Wells.

However, it should be read with caution for, despite its merits, it is vitiated by a fundamental misapprehension, or bias, as to the nature of the Great War, which could mislead readers unfamiliar with the period and seeking, for example, to contextualise and evaluate Wells's writings. In his *In the Fourth Year* (1918) Wells castigated those who "represent our war as a thing as mean and shameful as Germany's attack on Belgium." This Professor Buitenhuis does. He is apparently unaware that German propaganda success came *after* the Great War, when the deliberate deception and falsification by German historians, covertly government-financed, duped a generation of anglophone historians and publicists, and have apparently duped him. His book has, for historians today, a time-warp quality, locked into the propaganda myths not of the Great War but of the 1920s and 30s, before Auschwitz and Belsen forced historians to look again at the reality of German conduct in the preceding war. Buitenhuis ignores that reality, and so exaggerates

the effectiveness of Allied propaganda *qua* propaganda. It succeeded not primarily because of perfidious media manipulation, but largely because it was true: the Germans were the aggressors, they did break treaties, invade Belgium and commit atrocities. Buitenhuis unjustifiably dismisses the Bryce Report. He also unjustly condemns Wells for his criticism of Lansdowne for wanting peace with the existing German regime, "unevolutionized Germany." Yet what is now known (though not apparently by Buitenhuis) of German war aims — from the 1914 September memorandum though to as late as June 1918 - and of the peace treaties the Germans imposed — Frankfurt, Bucharest and Brest-Litovsk - surely vindicates Wells. In his Great War writings Wells was more often right than Buitenhuis admits.