

## Which shall it be?

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Leon Stover *The Prophetic Soul: A Reading of H.G. Wells's 'Things to Come'* Jefferson and London (McFarland & Co) 1987, 301 pp. \$39.95

Picture a clinical interior of lustrous surfaces and vertical lines, where the air is "properly mixed and conditioned" and there are no windows to let in any irregular light from the outside. Place in this refined environment two supposed citizens of the future, dressed in pale, flowing costumes with extended shoulders which would make Joan Collins envious. And seat rather stiffly next to them in a dark, three-piece suit the slightly portly and entirely incongruous figure of their creator, H.G. Wells.

What you then have is an actual photograph taken on the set of the film *Things to Come*, and it is instructive to set it beside another picture taken in the mid-1930s, reproduced in Tania Alexander's *A Little of All These* (reviewed by David Smith elsewhere in this issue), where Wells is seen under an open sky, against a tree-lined lake shore, walking toward the camera in an off-the-shoulder bathing costume, while behind him a relaxed couple enjoy fresh air and sunlight. The appealing location is Kallijärv in Estonia, where Wells was staying with his lover Moura Budberg and putting the finishing touches to his autobiography. In a revealing aside, Tania, Moura's daughter, tells us that Wells offered to pay for improvement and electrification of the lakeside house, but his suggestion only caused its residents embarrassment. ("We all thought Kallijärv wonderful as it was, and the idea of 'improving' it horrified us.")

Two Wellses are 'snapped' for our bemused contemplation here: the passionately individualistic artist, and the intellectual who, among many genuinely far-sighted observations and suggestions, dismissed the individual as little better than an illusion and asserted that man fulfilled his nature by absorption into a progressive over-mind.

"Temperamentally he is egotistic and romantic," Wells noted of himself in 1924, "intellectually he is clearly aware that the egotistic and romantic must go." Twelve years later, the film *Things to Come* represented an all-out assault on the egotistic and romantic temperament. Leon Stover's unsparing analysis leaves us in no doubt that Wells's war against himself proved as disastrous to his politics

as to his artistry. Taken seriously, the movie is a totalitarian fable, a celebration of the anti-democratic values realised in Stalin's Russia.

As previously in his dialogue novel *The Shaving of Karl Marx* (reviewed in the 1983 *Wellsian*), Professor Stover argues that, for all its talk of the proletariat, the USSR is not Marxist. Behind the rhetoric, the modern Russian state follows an alternative totalitarian tradition which was passed down from Saint-Simon through Comte to Wells. This brand of socialism is essentially a perversion of religious idealism, in which the individual is sacrificed to the collective by a hypocritical ruling elite. At the climax of *Things to Come* the young volunteer astronauts inside the moon cylinder are, in the words of Wells's original scenario, "posed as if crucified." The firing of them from the Space Gun demonstrates man's domination over nature and, as the Gun recoils, conveniently purges the 20,000 dissidents who are trying to prevent it happening.

Leon Stover, Professor of Anthropology at the Illinois Institute of Technology, relishes Wells's work even as he criticises it. His engagement with his subject adds greatly to the authority of his conclusions. Everyone who is seriously interested in Wells, in science fiction, or in politics and the cinema, will appreciate the exemplary way he assembles the documents for Wells's impeachment, and even those who react negatively to his line of argument will have to concede that he knows Wells's work through and through, and condemns its author with the utmost courtesy. The book contains the entire release script (1,049 shots), Wells's original scenario 'Whither Mankind?', a splendid thirty-page selection of photos (including the one described in my opening paragraph), extensive notes, a bibliography, and a closely-argued introduction which examines the film's implications. How did Wells adapt Hindu mythology in his scenario? Why is the Everytown Cinema sign designed in Streamlined Moderne script? Why does the Air League choose Basra as the site of its headquarters? And why *do* the elite of the future go in for such wide-shouldered jackets? No symbol is left unexplained and, with a couple of minor exceptions, I found the interpretations entirely convincing.

Whether they are the whole story is another matter, however. Wells Society Chairman Patrick Parrinder notes in his counterbalancing foreword to the book that there are many sides to Wells which are not evident in *Things to Come*. The film is an untypical work in being as one-sided and humourless as the utopia it advocates. After attending its world premier, Wells, far from endorsing it as a final statement of his views, dismissed it as a pretentious failure. Professor Stover himself has to admit that Wells was perfectly capable of a

“total lapse from Wellsism,” of ridiculing Lenin’s thinly-disguised lust for power and pointing out the dangers of elitism.

While Wells had a formidable grasp of the world’s problems and formulated many worthwhile aims, it has to be admitted that he was infinitely better at opening up challenging perspectives and calling the status quo into question than he was at envisaging a better order of things. He was usually on the side of the angels in practice - agitating for freedom of speech all round the world, including Russia - but when discoursing on politics he readily lapsed into pernicious fantasising. Such totalitarian leanings, common among intellectuals before the Second World War, normally come wrapped in ironies, cautions and qualifications to insulate them from direct contact with reality. Unwisely simplifying his ideas for a mass public, the film discards the insulation and lets a violent reaction take place. While on the screen the capitalist world is taken to pieces and remodelled, in reality it is Wells’s ideas that come to pieces. Thus in the original book *The Shape of Things to Come* the artist Theotocopulous was a complicating factor, a sympathetic revisionist moderating the extreme ideas of the Air Dictatorship. In the film treatment he becomes a mere counter-revolutionary fool, deserving and getting extermination.

It has frequently been remarked that Wells himself would have been ill-equipped to survive in one of his utopias. (Wells said it too, in *The Shape of Things to Come*). But it has rarely been suspected that this may be the very point of them. While Wells’s messiah-hero John Cabal (recognise the initials?) resists the seductive ways of courtesan Roxana, Wells constantly succumbed to female charm and lived on a helter-skelter of disorderly, irrational relationships with women. Surely self-loathing at his own ‘futile’ way of life is a much larger shaping, and distorting, force in Wells’s utopianism than any of his biographers has yet appreciated.

Back at the cinema, the public took to heart Wells’s prophecy of a world war in 1940, accompanied by blitz bombing. It is doubtful whether they can have been so impressed by the film’s overemphatic script and melodramatic acting, more redolent of the silent cinema of the ‘twenties than of the future. Those of us who still enjoy the movie do so for its peculiar mixture of inspired imagination (the horse-drawn Rolls Royce, the spectacular reconstruction of civilisation) and quaint clumsiness (Ralph Richardson’s acting, the celestial choir at the end proffering a false choice between “all the universe or nothingness” by belting out “Which shall it be?”). Professor Stover laments that the film has been unjustly relegated

to ‘camp’ slots on Chicago TV stations but, given its contemptible and patronising message, this may be exactly what it deserves. In the long run Joe and Joan Public usually get these things right.

Which shall it be, Wells the utopian or Wells the lover? My own preference is for neither of these, but for Wells the great storyteller. One of the attractions of Wells, however, is that, in choosing one of his areas of achievement, you are forced to confront and come to terms with all the others, and in that enterprise Leon Stover’s book is likely to prove an invaluable tool.

(*The Prophetic Soul* is obtainable from McFarland & Company, Inc., Box 611, Jefferson, North Carolina, 28640, USA, for \$41.45 including postage.)