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Reviews

Travels with a Morlock

**Stephen Baxter. *The Time Ships*.
Harper Collins, 1995. 455 pp. £15.99**

“Will he ever return?” One cannot choose but wonder, as the narrator says at the end of *The Time Machine*. The Traveller departs for the second time with indecent haste, barely a night’s sleep separating him from the rigours of his first voyage. Has he gone forward to one of the technologically advanced nearer ages, or is he stranded on some plesiosaurus-haunted Oolitic coral reef in the distant past? Since Wells never showed the least interest in writing a sequel, it has been left to other writers to answer our impatient questioning. Among these are at least two members of the H.G. Wells Society, David Lake with *The Man who Loved Morlocks* and now Stephen Baxter with *The Time Ships*.

In Baxter’s novel the Traveller once again tells his own story, beginning with the “noises of a Richmond morning” and the bath and breakfast provided by his house-keeper Mrs Watchett. With the bacon and sausages still heavy on his stomach our hero is off again, determined to gather more evidence to prove his time-travelling up to the hilt, and anxious, if possible, to rescue the abandoned Weena. But it soon looks as though it will not be possible, for he finds himself travelling into a different future from the one he encountered on his first voyage. As he launches into an apparently never-ending series of time journeys, he has to face the truth that he himself has changed history, and inaugurated a different time-stream, by the very fact of travelling in it. This means that he can never return to any of the times he has previously visited – or can he?

Such is the basic concept of Baxter’s novel, in which the Traveller goes forward to a world of super-intelligent, space-colonising Morlocks, backward to the Palæocene (with brief stops in 18991 and 1938), forward again to a non-human information-technology civilisation which manufactures the time-travelling mineral “Plattnerite” in industrial quantities, and backward to the birth of the universe. *The Time Ships* as a typical modern science-fictional blockbuster is the current equivalent of the Victorian three-decker – a huge, complicated “time-ship” compared to Wells’s bare framework of a novella. Luckily, this elaborate tale is powered by some of the same magic sub-

stance that enabled Wells to transport his readers into the far future.

It may be that the brevity of *The Time Machine* reflects the comparatively restricted speculative horizon of nineteenth-century physics, dominated by the doom-laden science of Thermodynamics. In Baxter's novel, the Traveller is gradually introduced to the headier scientific atmosphere of our own century by Nebogipfel, the intelligent Morlock who becomes his companion on most of his voyages. Thanks to Nebogipfel's instruction, our hero becomes conversant with nuclear physics, quantum theory, cybernetics, Gödel's idea of rotating universes, chaos theory, the "big bang", and the concept of the time loop which enables him to go back to meet his younger self. Since it is the returning Traveller who is the source of the Plattnerite which makes the construction of the first time machine possible, Baxter's sequel also functions as a prequel to *The Time Machine*.

Though there are times when the author's invention seems to flag, in general this is a novel packed with brilliant speculations and considerable suspense. It may be that, unlike his predecessor, Stephen Baxter has little to say to "our present discontents", but the climax of his narrative – in which the Traveller goes forward to the furthest imaginable reach of our future, and then back to the very moment of the birth of the cosmos – is magnificently sustained. Here Baxter shows himself to be a true visionary, though in the tradition of Olaf Stapledon rather than that of Wells. But Wellsians in particular will enjoy both the tactful evocation of the Time Traveller and his era, and the manifold allusions to Wells's novels and stories. One of the great pleasures of *The Time Ships* is that Baxter is such a careful reader of Wells and his works.

Finally, what about poor Weena? Those who turn to fiction for human interest rather than cosmic speculations will wish to know that the Traveller never wholly loses sight of his project of a rescue mission to 802,701. But another remote descendant of humanity, the Morlock Nebogipfel, steals the show from Weena here. Thanks to Stephen Baxter's cunning and imagination, in *The Time Ships* gratitude and a mutual tenderness live one in that most unlikely of human relationships, between man and Morlock.

Patrick Parrinder

Science Fiction and Prophecy

Patrick Parrinder *Shadows of the Future: H.G. Wells, Science Fiction and Prophecy*. Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 1995 170 pp. hb £25.00,

pb £14.99

A new book on Wells by one of our Vice-Presidents is bound to be a welcome event. In this case it is also a slightly surprising one. Much of the material has previously appeared in various journals, but readers who therefore anticipate a "Parrinder's Greatest Hits" package, and so hope to reacquaint themselves with such gems as "HGW and Beatrice Webb: Reflections on a Quarrel" or "The Roman Spring of George Gissing and HGW", will have to defer at least some of the expected pleasure. Professor Parrinder has instead picked out several thematically-related pieces and, by drastically revising them and adding a new prefatory essay, converted the collection into a fresh coherent study.

Those of you with a long memory or a copy of the 1981 *Wellsian* may recall a talk for the Society by Professor Parrinder called "*The Time Machine: H.G. Wells's Journey Through Death*," a stimulating discussion of what is meant by prophetic writing, how Wells in particular took on the role of prophet, and the cultural contexts within which he worked. The new book is effectively that piece "writ large". Its stated purpose (unlike most products, it goes on to deliver somewhat more than it promises) is "to show how Wells developed and explored the literary potential of prophecy in new ways."

The first chapter examines the prophetic element in science fiction, the second the development of Wells's unique outlook. The perspective thus acquired is turned in Chapters Three and four on *The Time Machine* and *The Island of Doctor Moreau*, generating a discussion of these remarkable books from which no student of Wells will fail to take fresh insights. Professor Parrinder uses Chapter Five to annex Gibbon's *Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* to Wells Studies and makes a thoroughly convincing case that this mighty work is a kind of "missing link" in Wells's development, Gibbon's point of view being shown to inform many of Wells's best writings. Chapter Six refocuses on Wells's more realistic fiction and shows how his prophetic imagination grapples with the inertia of our world with more or less productive results, this discussion shedding new light on the much commented-upon theme of "disentanglement".