

Book Review: *The Sea Lady: A Tissue of Moonshine. A Critical Text of the 1902 London First Edition, with an Introduction and Appendices*, by H.G. Wells, ed. by Leon Stover (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2001). xii, 170 pp. ISBN 0-7864-0996-7. \$49.50. Order line: 1-800-253-2187. [By John S. Partington]

Of all the seven volumes in Leon Stover's 'Annotated H.G. Wells' series, *The Sea Lady* is the most valuable for two reasons: firstly, it is the most difficult story of the series to obtain nowadays, with it being unpopular when first issued in 1902 and rarely reprinted since; and secondly, it contains the least number of Stover's by now infamous footnotes! Indeed, much of Stover's commentary in this critical edition was made in his 1989 *Wellsian* article, "H.G. Wells and *The Sea Lady* – A Platonic Affair in the 'Great Outside'". By Stover's reading, the mermaid of the novel's title is a metaphysical revolutionary casting scorn on earthly politics and advocating individual death for the collective good (though to Stover, 'collective' here means a regimented Fascist-Communist illiberal anti-humanistic totalitarian police state as supposedly outlined by Henri Saint-Simon). Ignore the extremes in this reading, however, and Stover's interpretation of *The Sea Lady* becomes legitimate. Chatteris, the politician-to-be, experiences a crisis of belief and seeks release from the normalcy of his political career and his stilted emotional life. The sea lady offers him an outlet for escape and the reader is left puzzling over what kind of choice Chatteris actually has – a continuation of his humdrum life or ecstatic death in the sea. By choosing the latter, one is made to think of other types of death in pursuit of pleasure such as drug overdoses or high-speed car crashes and Chatteris's choice becomes easier to believe (even if still difficult to endorse). Where Stover's reading becomes difficult to endorse, however, is when he sees Chatteris's choice as anticipating the death of the individual at the hands of Communist, Fascist or Nazi totalitarianism. *The Sea Lady* does not suggest this choice in the least. It is to be hoped that Stover's critical text will enthrall others to read the fantasy critically and elevate Wells's charming tale to the position I think we all in the H.G. Wells Society believe it deserves. For now let us be grateful that it is back in print, albeit at an inflated price.

Book Review: H.G. Wells and Youth – Introductory Studies of Wells, 1990-2001
[By John S. Partington]

John Hammond, *A Preface to H.G. Wells* (Harlow: Longman, 2001). xiv, 225 pp. ISBN 0-582-40472-X. £14.99.

William J. Boerst, *Time Machine: The Story of H.G. Wells* (Greensboro, NC: Morgan Reynolds, 2000). 112 pp. ISBN 1-883846-40-4.

Don Nardo, *The Importance of H.G. Wells* (San Diego: Lucent, 1992). 111 pp. ISBN 1-56006-025-5.

Brian Murray, *H.G. Wells* (New York: Continuum, 1990). 190 pp. ISBN 0-8264-0468-5.

In the many discussions held concerning the rise and rise of Wells's literary reputation since the 1960s, we rarely consider the attitude of school children and university undergraduates towards his life, work and thought. Indeed, in relation to school children, 'life' and 'thought' might seem inappropriate fields to the innocent minds of those many would simply want to urge to read and enjoy reading. However, a glance at the overviews of Wells published since 1990 reveals the importance placed upon Wells's private and personal life by authors who aim their studies at youthful readers.

The earliest of the studies I will look at briefly in this review is Brian Murray's *H.G. Wells* from 1990. Murray is clearly writing for an undergraduate audience and in this he succeeds very well. Although a biographical opening chapter is standard these days in author studies, Murray also includes chapters looking specifically at 'Wells and Women' and 'The Reputation'. These not for sensational purposes but rather attempting to coax the student into seeing Wells's literary achievements in the light of his private life, both in terms of his intimate relations and his world-political role. Whilst Murray does not discuss the varying theoretical approaches to literary research, he is clearly urging students to experiment with psychoanalytical and new-historical methods of interpretation amongst others. Another strength of Murray's book is the equal weighting he gives to Wells's scientific romances and his realist works of the Edwardian period, as well as including a useful (though perhaps not detailed enough) chapter on 'The Later Novels'. I consider this a strength as

American academe (Murray is based at Loyola College, Maryland) often ignores Wells's later work altogether and marginalises his Edwardian novels. Murray usefully redresses the balance and aims to inspire research in works other than Wells's classical science fiction.

Don Nardo's *The Importance of H.G. Wells* (1992) is very different to Murray's study in several ways, though at its level is equally useful. Nardo writes for the schoolchild of perhaps 12 to 16 years of age and it is interesting to see what an American publisher wishes to prioritise in an overview of Wells. This study is a part of Lucent Books's 'The Importance of' series which "analyzes the lives of the world's most influential men and women" – Wells's inclusion in such a list is pleasantly telling from the outset. Interestingly, Nardo begins his work with an introduction entitled 'The World Builder' before providing a biographical chapter portraying Wells as a self-made case of 'rags to riches'. Of the nine chapters (plus introduction), only two are dedicated specifically to Wells's literary work. The rest view Wells as a prophet, a controversialist, a teacher, an optimist and a crafter of the New World Order, though of course the overwhelming source material for these chapters is his writing, particularly his fiction. The book aims to portray Wells the writer within his general career context, looking only fleetingly at his private life. Thus Wells's politics, vision and frustration looms large throughout, though the penultimate chapter, 'The Eternal Optimist' skews Wells's disillusionment and leaves the reader believing Wells died a hopeful man. For a schools publication, Nardo's study contains useful references to further reading and works consulted, and the book is full of interesting and previously unpublished photographs of Wells as well as many other people and places related to Wells and his mission. One might criticise Nardo's book for giving to great a place to Wells's political role at the expense of his literary, but given the ignorance surrounding Wells's world role, this bias can easily be forgiven. The readers of Nardo's book will find an abundance of literature dealing with Wells the novelist and scientific romancer, but very little on Wells the political activist and human rights and world government advocate.

Following a space of some years, William J. Boerst published another study of Wells aimed at high-school students. I need say little about this volume as it has been reviewed by Sylvia Hardy in an earlier volume of *The Wellsian* (2000). This study gives a more balanced picture than Nardo's book of Wells the man of letters and

Wells the world-statesman. Its referencing of sources is again good as is its bibliography of Wells's works, though, as Hardy pointed out in her review, it is full of 'Americanisms' which linguistically do not apply to Wells and it suffers from several minor errors of detail. Nonetheless, after a period of drought in schools writing on Wells, Boerst's volume is a satisfactory addition to the slim canon.

The most recent overview of Wells's life, work and thought for young people, and the only British contribution since the mid-1980s, is John Hammond's *A Preface to H.G. Wells* (2001). In many ways, Hammond's volume is the most conventional in presentation of the four here reviewed. It is clearly aimed at the undergraduate and is divided, no doubt due to the fact that it is part of a uniform 'Preface Books' series, into sections dealing with family background, life and times, biography, critical commentary and reference section. Whereas the books aimed at schoolchildren give equal emphasis to Wells's literary and political work, Hammond stresses Wells's position as writer and journalist, looking at Wells's more overtly political life simply to contextualise his writing. This is no criticism of Hammond, however, but rather evidence of the extreme specialisation of academia where a volume aimed at literary scholars ought not to overstate the subject's other sides and can certainly not be marketed as a multidisciplinary work for use by historians, political scientists, etc. As we know in the H.G. Wells Society, however, this is exactly how Wells, and writers such as Orwell and Koestler, ought to be treated given the nature of their literary and other careers.

What Hammond's book offers which the others cannot come near to doing, is a sheer knowledge of the subject and a cultural understanding of Wells's writing and background consequent on Hammond's years of study and dedication to understanding Wells and his world. It is for this reason that there are few people active in Wells studies today who could equal such a useful introduction to Wells as a literary figure, and none who could better it. Hammond's volume is enjoyable to read and takes one on a trip through time to Wells period, to his writing desk, to his literary garden parties, and provides an understanding of the motives and passion which went into Wells's work. If Murray's study is a more detailed literary-critical introduction for undergraduates, Hammond's is greater for its understanding of how Wells thought and why and how he wrote, whilst including literary-critical case studies of *The Time*

Machine (1895) and *Tono-Bungay* (1909) to boot, and emphasising the importance of Wells fiction of the 1920s, 1930s and 1940s.

All the works here reviewed will be useful in encouraging young readers and scholars to take up Wells for pleasure and / or for study. The major problem for us in the Society is that these works will not permeate into schools, colleges and universities in numbers enough to convert a generation of schoolchildren and university students to consider Wells as a major figure, both literary and political. To achieve this, we need more studies like these to be published, and greater support from school-curricula and university-course designers around the world.

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- Cantor, Paul A., "The Invisible Man and the Invisible Hand: H.G. Wells's Critique of Capitalism", *American Scholar* (Summer 1999), *Encyclopaedia Britannica Online*, <<http://www.britannica.com/magazine/article/0,5744,337532,00.html>>.
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- Fitting, Peter, "Estranged Invaders: *The War of the Worlds*", in Patrick Parrinder, ed., *Learning from Other Worlds: Estrangement, Cognition and the Politics of Science Fiction and Utopia* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2000), pp. 127-45.
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- Hill, Amelia, "The secret loves of H.G. Wells unmasked", *Observer* (7 January 2001), p. 3.
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