

COMPETING PROPHETS: H. G. WELLS, GEORGE GRIFFITH, AND VISIONS OF FUTURE WAR, 1893-1914

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The enduring (and in recent years, resurgent) popularity of H. G. Wells can be attributed, at least in part, to his celebrated reputation as a polymath. In his obituary in *The Times*, Wells was remembered as a ‘novelist, fantasist, analyst of society, amateur of science, [and] populariser of ideas’.¹ In a moving tribute published in the *Daily Mail*, the playwright and broadcaster J. B. Priestley described Wells as ‘a many-sided man’, who ‘began as a story-teller’, became a ‘sociological thinker’, and ‘achieved his greatest audience as a popular educator’. Priestley put particular emphasis on Wells as a prophet, praising his unique ability for predicting and engaging with ‘the future’. ‘The world we must bring into existence,’ Priestley asserted, ‘will remember him with gratitude and affection, as one of its first prophets and architects, who untiringly and courageously, foreshadowed the Shape of Things to Come’.² Though the modern world is some distance from a Wellsian utopia, he is often remembered in terms that would have gratified his friend Priestley. Dedicating a ‘doodle’ to Wells on the 143 anniversary of his birth in September 2009, the internet giant Google described him as ‘an author who encouraged fantastical thinking about what is possible, on this planet and beyond’.³

This reputation is especially prescient when considering Wells’s numerous visions of future war. Wells had an uncanny ability for assessing how rapid technological advance would shape the conduct of modern warfare. He was one of few analysts who understood the impact modern technology was likely to have on military strategy, and in particular, the challenges such developments would pose for offensive operations. Just as the Polish financier Ivan Bloch predicted entrenchment, warning that in the next great war ‘the spade will be as indispensable to the soldier as his rifle’, the futurological work *Anticipations* saw Wells identify ‘picturesque incidents of battle’ and ‘heroic conclusive moments’ as part of ‘the old system of fighting’.⁴ In his literary output, moreover, Wells produced several narratives that proved prophetic.

¹ ‘Mr H. G. Wells’, *The Times*, 14 August 1946, 7.

² ‘He Saw the Shape of Things to Come’, *Daily Mail*, 14 August 1946, 2.

³ ‘A Mysterious Series for H. G. Wells’, *Google Official Blog* 20 September 2009, <<http://googleblog.blogspot.co.uk/2009/09/mysterious-series-for-hg-wells.html>> [accessed 19th December 2014].

⁴ I. Bloch, *Modern Weapons and Modern War* (London: Grant Richards, 1900), xxvii; H. G. Wells, *Anticipations of the Reaction of Mechanical and Scientific Progress upon Human Life and Thought* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1899), 194-5.

Envisaging the emergence of armoured vehicles in *The Land Ironclads* (1903), predicting the inconclusive nature of aerial bombardment in *The War in the Air* (1908), and anticipating atomic warfare in *The World Set Free* (1914), Wells demonstrates an extraordinary flair for accurate speculation throughout his fiction of future war.

Wells has often been treated, in this regard, as the exception that proves the rule. The corpus of late-Victorian and Edwardian future-war fiction is arguably distinguished 'by a complete failure to foresee the form a modern war would take'. For the literary historian I. F. Clarke, this failure was inevitable:

It was the result of the now familiar time-lag between the rapid development of technology and the belated abandonment of ideas, mental habits, and social attitudes that the new machines had rendered out-of-date. When men thought of war they did not foresee the struggles of great armies and anonymous masses of conscripts that finally came to pass. Instead, drawing on an imagination still burdened by a long tradition, which presented war as an affair of brief battles and heroic deeds by individuals, they underestimated the scale of actual warfare.⁵

Characterised by short engagements, brilliant tacticians, and unabashed patriotism, British future-war fiction helped to cement this anachronistic understanding of conflict. The prophetic ability of Wells is all the more remarkable by these terms, as he was a lone voice in this literary wilderness.

There are those, however, who dispute this sanctified status. Various historians and literary critics have argued that, by treating Wells in this manner, the achievements and predictions of other writers become unjustly obscured. Such authors sit in the shadow cast by their illustrious contemporary, approached not in their own right, but as 'the rivals of H. G. Wells'.⁶ One writer that is thought to have particularly suffered from this dynamic is George Griffith. Scholars of Griffith, a prolific late-Victorian author who achieved fame with his novel *The Angel of the Revolution* (1893), have long bemoaned the unequal reputations of the two men. Considering it 'quite extraordinary that scholars of science fiction have placed so little importance on Griffith's work', Robert Godwin has attributed much of the blame to constant 'negative comparisons to his more famous counterpart, H. G. Wells'.⁷ The science fiction historian and critic Sam Moskowitz, in turn, strikes a similar tone:

⁵ I. F. Clarke, *Voices Prophesying War: Future Wars 1763-3749* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992), 64.

⁶ A. K. Russell, *Science Fiction by the Rivals of H. G. Wells* (New Jersey: Castle Books, 1979).

⁷ Robert Godwin, 'George Griffith, From Jules Verne to Tranquility Base', in G. Griffith, *Around the World in 65 Days: The Journal of the Real Phileas Fogg* (Ontario: Apogee Books, 2010), 25.

His early success could not help but be a major influence on an entire generation of British science fiction writers. Despite this, despite at least a half-dozen best-sellers, despite thirty-seven books, despite the fact that while still living he made the *Who's Who*, he does not rate a single line in any broad literary history, past or present.⁸

This perceived injustice is far from unique. Griffith is hardly the only author whose popularity failed to translate into historical longevity.⁹ Yet by analysing his close relationship with Wells, it may be possible to get a sense of why. It is not enough, of course, to dismiss Griffith as a literary inferior, or to suggest that Wells was simply the better writer of the two. It is possible, nonetheless, to identify the great contrasts between the two authors, and to assess how this shaped the production and reception of their fiction. By exploring Griffith *through* Wells, this article will challenge several key arguments made by Griffith scholars: firstly, that Wells admired and was influenced by Griffith; and secondly, that Griffith's understanding of modern technology and its influence on war and society was comparable to that of Wells. Finally, the article will question the idea that Griffith was not in the business of writing 'moralistic fables'.¹⁰ Though Griffith did not propose radical change and technocratic reorganisation in the manner of Wells, his work was just as heavily shaped by a specific set of social and political principles. George Griffith's future-war fiction offered a world view which was, in Everett Bleiler's words, 'the embodiment of what was wrong with the British Victorian *Weltanschauung*'.¹¹

GEORGE GRIFFITH: THE REAL PHILEAS FOGG

George Chetwynd Griffith Jones was born in 1857 in Plymouth, Devon.¹² His father, George Alfred Jones, was an Anglican cleric, born in Madras in 1823. His mother, Jeanette Capinster, was brought up in Bath. Married in 1853, the couple moved north to Ashton-under-Lyne shortly after the birth of their son. Upon the death of his father, George – then fourteen – was sent to boarding school in Southport. Prior to this point Griffith's education had been sporadic,

⁸ Sam Moskowitz, 'War: Warriors of If', in *Strange Horizons: The Spectrum of Science Fiction* (New York: Scribner, 1976), 183.

⁹ Notable examples of this from Griffith's own period include William Le Queux, and to a lesser extent, Arnold Bennett.

¹⁰ Godwin, 'George Griffith, From Jules Verne to Tranquility Base', in Griffith, *Around the World in 65 Days*, 25.

¹¹ Everett F. Bleiler, *Science-Fiction: The Early Years* (Kent: Kent State University Press, 1990), 302-3.

¹² The National Archives: Public Record Office, Kew, *Census Returns of England and Wales, 1861* (Class: RG 9; Piece: 843; Folio: 83; Page: 23; GSU roll: 542710)

and largely based on the classics and popular fiction on the shelves of his father's substantial private library. Though competent at Latin and Greek, his arithmetical skills were particularly poor. By the time he left the school, Griffith had excelled across the curriculum.¹³

Though finishing his formal education at an early age, Griffith went on to matriculate, in his own words, from 'the greatest of all universities – the world'. Joining a 'lime-juicer' at Liverpool bound for the Antipodes, Griffith jumped ship in Melbourne, having learnt 'more of the world' in his seventy-eight days at sea 'than I had learnt in fourteen years' of schooling. During his time in Australia he picked up work in whatever fashion it came, spending periods as an itinerant labourer, a stockrider, and a butcher, before securing employment as a teacher at a preparatory school.¹⁴ Griffith also worked as a teacher in Germany before his return to England, where he found work at school in Brighton, and later, at Bolton Grammar School.¹⁵

It was journalism and popular fiction, however, through which Griffith soon found himself earning his keep. Moving to London in 1888 (shortly after his marriage to Elizabeth Brierly), he began working for a local paper. After a brief and eventual stint as editor of this struggling title, Griffith's luck turned in 1890, securing a job 'as a mail-clerk and general gopher' at *Pearson's Weekly*.¹⁶ This began a long and profitable association between him and the newspaper proprietor Cyril Arthur Pearson. With the magazine casting around for a new serial in late 1892, Griffith became the unlikely provider, producing a synopsis overnight for a future-war adventure story. Written alongside his administrative duties, *The Angel of the Revolution* was serialised over the course of 1893. Published as a book by Tower in October, Griffith's work was a huge success, going into at least eleven editions. Sam Moskowitz even suggests that *The Angel of the Revolution* may have been 'the best-selling future-war book of the nineteenth century'.¹⁷ Though dividing critics, the novel received its fair share of glowing praise. For one contemporary reviewer, Griffith's work was 'one to be read with intense interest', as it represented 'an entirely new departure in the art of romance-writing'.¹⁸

Griffith went on to become a prolific and popular author. Later successes of his include *The Outlaws of the Air* (1895), *A Honeymoon in Space* (1901) and

¹³ Much of the subsequent biography is taken from Moskowitz, *Strange Horizons*, 182-217. Unfortunately, Moskowitz gives few clues as to the nature or location of his information. Alternative sources, as such, have been utilised wherever possible.

¹⁴ 'Death of Mr. Geo. Griffith', *Daily Mail*, 5 June 1906, 5.

¹⁵ Moskowitz, *The Spectrum of Science Fiction*, 184-5.

¹⁶ Godwin, 'George Griffith, From Jules Verne to Tranquility Base', in Griffith, *Around the World in 65 Days*, 5-6. According to Moskowitz, Griffith 'got involved in a political crusade that resulted in a series of libel actions', eventually forcing him to close down the paper. See *The Spectrum of Science Fiction*, 185.

¹⁷ *Spectrum*, 192.

¹⁸ 'Literature', *Dundee Courier* (13 November 1893), 6.

The Great Weather Syndicate (1906). Yet it is *The Angel of the Revolution* for which he is best known. Michael Moorcock has suggested the work represents ‘the first full-scale marriage between the ‘marvel tale’ of Verne ... the ‘future war’ tale of [George] Chesney and his imitators, and, to some degree, the political utopianism of *News from Nowhere*’.¹⁹ The plot is based around a global underground network known as ‘the Brotherhood’. Recruiting the services of Richard Arnold, a scientist who has just cracked the secret of aerial navigation, the novel is an eclectic mixture of anti-state rhetoric, Russian despotism, anarchist-nihilist revolution, and racial exceptionalism. With the help of Arnold’s newly designed airship, the Brotherhood hope to ‘fire the shot that will set the world in a blaze’. Triggering conflict in Europe and a Russo-French invasion of Britain, the group spearheads the formation of a populist Anglo-Saxon Federation (uniting the US and Britain), before defeating Imperial Russia, and sentencing the Tsar to exile in Siberia. The novel is peopled by a collection of fantastical characters, such as the brilliant, disfigured leader of the Brotherhood Natas, and his daughter Natasha, the eponymous Angel. Though lacking in literary quality, and hamstrung by inconsistencies of plot and character, *The Angel of the Revolution* is a remarkable work. Describing the novel as one of ‘continued influence and relevance’ Steven McLean has argued that *The Angel of the Revolution* ‘deserves to wing its way into the modern critical consciousness’.²⁰

Literary success did not dampen Griffith’s enthusiasm for travelling. In March 1894, at the invitation of his ever-demanding employers, Griffith began a successful attempt to break the record for circumnavigating the globe, then held by a journalist from the *New York Herald*. Relishing his part in this publicity stunt, Griffith’s sixty-five day journey was covered at length by *Pearson’s Weekly*. Boarding a ship from Naples to Hong Kong via Ceylon, and another from Yokohama to Vancouver, Griffith travelled the length of the Canadian Pacific Railway, before taking a final boat from New York to Southampton, and arriving back at Charring Cross on 16th May.²¹ Griffith also travelled extensively in the US, Australia, and South America. Reputed to have travelled ‘once across the Rockies, thrice over the Andes... [and] three times round the horn’, Griffith additionally boasted to have successfully located ‘the source of the Amazon river-system’. He also facetiously claimed to have been ‘the last

¹⁹ Michael Moorcock, *London Peculiar and Other Nonfiction* (Oakland: PM Press, 2012), 195.

²⁰ Steven McClean, ‘Introduction’, in George Griffith, *The Angel of the Revolution* (Brighton: Victorian Secrets Ltd, 2012), 5-28 (13). For more on *Angel* see Brian Stableford, *Scientific Romance in Britain 1890-1950* (London: Fourth Estate, 1985), 44-55.

²¹ See Griffith, *Around the World in 65 Days*.

Englishman to fall at Agincourt', having in 1898 piloted a hot-air balloon from London to eastern France.²²

In many respects, then, George Griffith was the antithesis of his contemporary H. G. Wells. Indeed, the term contemporary is arguably inappropriate. Although their births were separated by less than ten years, Wells and Griffith were products of radically different ages. While Griffith modelled himself on that quintessential (albeit fictional) Victorian Phileas Fogg, Wells was undisputedly a product of modernity. Unlike the classical education of various literary contemporaries, such as G. K. Chesterton and John Galsworthy, Wells's fragmented education was thoroughly modern, ending at the Norman School of Science, initially under 'Darwin's Bulldog' Thomas Huxley. Wells is closely associated with a range of progressive political movements, such as his temperamental relationship with Fabianism, and his interest in 'National Efficiency', described by Geoffrey Searle as the 'dominant political catchcry of the Edwardian period'.²³ His social attitudes, particularly regarding the vagaries of class, and his comparatively liberal views on sexuality, were certainly more modern than they were traditional. If George Griffith was the archetypal Victorian adventure hero, H. G. Wells was undoubtedly Edwardian. This distinction shaped their understanding of the world around them, and coloured their respective bodies of fiction.²⁴

A HOSTILE RELATIONSHIP

The relationship between H. G. Wells and George Griffith is the subject of contrasting interpretations. For the majority of Wells experts, in fact, the relationship has not warranted interpretation of any kind. Numerous critical studies of Wells's extended literary and social circle have unearthed very little in the way of meaningful association between the two authors. As Wells was a man who forged close friendships and engaged in acrimonious feuds with a range of authors and commentators, this lack of evidence is not without significance.²⁵ Though Griffith and Wells were undoubtedly aware of each

²² 'Griffith, George Chetwynd', *Who Was Who* (London: A & C Black), online ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, April 2014).

²³ G. R. Searle, *The Quest for National Efficiency: A Study in British Politics and Political Thought, 1899-1914* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1971), 2.

²⁴ For a recent analysis of Wells's work, and specifically his ideas on the purpose of literature, see Simon J. James, *Maps of Utopia: H. G. Wells, Modernity and the End of Culture* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012).

²⁵ The literature on Wells's friendships and fall-outs is naturally vast. Recent examples include Linda Dryden, "'The Difference between Us": Conrad, Wells, and the English Novel', *Studies in the Novel*, 45.2 (2013), 214-33, John Sloan, *H. G. Wells, Fabianism and the 'Shape of Things to Come'* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2012), Ivan Wise, 'Fabian Enemies: H. G. Wells and Shaw' *Shavian: The Journal of the Shaw Society*, 11.1 (2009). See also Leon Edel and Gordon N. Ray, eds, *Henry James and H. G. Wells: A Record of their Friendships, their Debate in the Art of Fiction, and their Quarrel* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1958).

others' presence, few Wells scholars consider Griffith to have had a meaningful influence on Wells's life and work.

By contrast, Griffith enthusiasts place significant emphasis on the relationship between the two authors. Such scholars highlight that Griffith's success predated the emergence of Wells, and as such, exerted an important, little-understood influence on his early work. In the view of Moskowitz, Wells held 'ambivalent feelings of contempt, respect, and envy ... towards his popular science fiction contemporary'.²⁶ Describing the 'grudging fascination' Wells felt for Griffith, Robert Godwin dismisses 'the insinuation' that the latter stole from the former:

Griffith pre-empted him with a Mars story (*Olga Romanoff*), a space voyage (*A Honeymoon in Space*), a comet story (*The Great Crellin Comet*), an aerial warfare story (*Outlaws of the Air*) and even his 'time travel' story (*Valdar the Oft-Born*) was published before Wells adapted his *Chronic Argonauts* into the bestseller *The Time Machine*.²⁷

The intention here is not to dismiss this concept out of hand. It is, after all, perfectly possible that Wells was directly influenced by Griffith, consciously or unconsciously. Nevertheless, the source material that this interpretation is currently based on does warrant reconsideration.

During his period as literary critic for the *Saturday Review*, Wells referred to Griffith on several occasions.²⁸ In June 1895, Wells wrote a mixed review of *The Outlaws of the Air*:

to those who can endure Jules Verne at his worst Mr. Griffith should prove entertaining. One or two passages rise above the general level, the first appearance of the flying ship for instance, and incline us to the opinion that Mr. Griffith, had he more restraint, might even rival Jules Verne at his best.²⁹

While not a glowing endorsement, this was hardly a hatchet job. Wells was not one to mince his words – he would later suggest that *The Rajah's Sapphire* by M. P. Shiel 'appears to have been written by a lunatic'.³⁰ Yet many of the qualities identified by the review of *The Outlaws of the Air* were consistent with a broader pattern of Wellsian criticism. As Robert Philmus has convincingly

²⁶ Moskowitz, *Strange Horizons*, 182.

²⁷ Godwin, 'George Griffith, From Jules Verne to Tranquility Base', in Griffith, *Around the World in 65 Days*, 25.

²⁸ For more on the circumstances that led to Wells beginning work at the *Saturday Review* see H. G. Wells, *Experiment in Autobiography*, vol. 1 (London: Jonathan Cape, 1969), 352-359.

²⁹ 'Fiction', *Saturday Review*, 79.2069 (1895), 838.

³⁰ 'Fiction', *Saturday Review*, 82.2126 (1896), 96.

mapped out, Wells the critic valued individuality, originality, humour, and restraint.³¹ The unrestrained, inconsistent Griffith met few of these criteria. Most damning of all, as Wells would later reiterate, Griffith simply was not ploughing his own furrow. Reviewing Max Pemberton's *The Impregnable City*, Wells described the author as 'a composite photograph' of 'Stevenson [...] Mr. Rider Haggard, [and] Mr. Griffiths [sic]'", whose novel explored themes invented, 'but unhappily not patented, by Jules Verne'.³² Griffith's writing may not have inflamed the ire of Wells, but the idea that it directly influenced him seems, by these passages at least, well wide of the mark.

If Wells was influenced by Griffith's work, this debt was never directly acknowledged. Instead, Wells actively distanced himself from Griffith, and even identified such association as a negative influence on his popularity. In a letter to Arnold Bennett in 1902, Wells bemoaned his lack of considered press coverage in the US. Complaining that 'no decent article on me, no decent criticism (not even a column of reviewing even) has ever appeared about me in America', Wells feared that the 'great American public has for the most part never heard of me'. The limited coverage he was receiving, moreover, was not to his liking:

Paragraphs circulate to the effect that I was a 'dry goods clerk' and I class with George Griffith as a purveyor of wild 'pseudo' scientific extravaganza ... (the) 'English Jules Verne' is my utmost glory. ... Stupid praise at this juncture would do me vast harm, insincere advertisement exaggeration of what I am.

Irritated by the disengaged indifference of summary reviews, Wells clearly resented being placed in the same bracket as Griffith. Wells classed himself, as he admitted to Bennett, as 'one of the first hundred writing in English now'. Grouping him with popular hacks such as Griffith, therefore, appeared a gross injustice.³³

The piece of evidence that is most often highlighted as proof that Wells was influenced by Griffith is a passage in the opening chapter of *The War in the Air*, 'Of Progress and the Smallways Family'. The chapter concerns the 'first great boom in aeronautics', describing how 'the Goddess of Change was turning her disturbing attention' from the land 'to the sky'. For the great majority of Britons, who like the Smallways family were not personally involved in the

³¹ Robert M. Philmus, 'H. G. Wells as Literary Critic for the *Saturday Review*', *Science Fiction Studies*, 4 (1977), 166-93.

³² 'Fiction', *Saturday Review*, 80.2075 (1895), 150.

³³ H. G. Wells to Arnold Bennett (8 February 1902), in *Arnold Bennett and H. G. Wells: A Record of a Personal and Literary Friendship*, ed. Harris Wilson (Urbana: University of Illinois Press: 1960), 72-3.

aeronautical race, their sense of ‘air-mindedness’ was achieved indirectly.³⁴ One key element of this process, as Wells identifies, was popular culture:

Grubb and Bert heard of it in a music-hall, then it was driven home to their minds by the cinematograph, then Bert’s imagination was stimulated by a sixpenny edition of that aeronautic classic, Mr. George Griffith’s ‘The Outlaws of the Air,’ and so the thing really got hold of them.³⁵

Taken as an endorsement of Griffith and his influence on aeronautics, this passage has been presented as Wells’s reluctant tribute to his groundbreaking forebear. For Moskowitz, *The War in the Air* demonstrated that Wells ‘was obviously greatly impressed’ by Griffith.³⁶

This benevolence was hardly characteristic of Wells. His reference to *The Outlaws of the Air*, as such, can be read quite differently. Rather than a tribute to Griffith, the passage is better understood as a critique of his literary legacy (Griffith having died in 1906). Wells imagined Bert Smallways, the antihero of *The War in the Air*, as a worrying representation of the human condition, the exemplification, to use C. D. Eby’s words, of ‘the under-educated, misinformed Englishman’.³⁷ A ‘vulgar little creature, the sort of pert, limited soul that the old civilisation of the early twentieth century produced by the million in every country of the world’, Smallways is a product of ‘life in narrow streets...[and] mean houses he could not look over’. He is, moreover, unconsciously trapped ‘in a narrow circle of ideas from which there was no escape’.³⁸ As a review in *The Bookman* put it, Smallways personifies ‘the follies, weaknesses, and general shortcomings of the human race’.³⁹ He is thus exactly the sort of person, in Wells’s eyes, whose interest in aeronautics was likely to have been piqued by the popular fiction of George Griffith. Placing a Griffith novel in the hands of his everyman protagonist, then, was an off-hand insult, not a literary tribute.

³⁴ For more on ‘air-mindedness’, i.e. the process by which the British public accepted the plausibility (and later, the reality) of aerial navigation see Michael Paris, *Winged Warfare: The Literature and Theory of Aerial Warfare in Britain, 1859-1917* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1992), 16, and Brett Holman, *The Next War in the Air: Britain’s Fear of the Bomber, 1908-1941* (Ashgate: Farnham, 2014), 187-202.

³⁵ H. G. Wells, *The War in the Air*, ed. Patrick Parrinder (London: Penguin, 2005), 11. Strangely, later editions of the work refer to ‘Mr. George Griffith’s “The Clipper of the Clouds”’, conflating *The Outlaws of the Air* with Jules Verne’s 1886 novel *Robur the Conqueror*.

³⁶ Moskowitz, *Strange Horizons*, 183.

³⁷ Cecil Degrott Eby, *The Road to Armageddon: The Martial Spirit in English Popular Literature* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1907), 48.

³⁸ Wells, *The War in the Air*, 67.

³⁹ ‘The War in the Air’, *The Bookman*, 35.207 (1908), 158.

IMAGINING FUTURE FLIGHT

Harsh though it appears, Wells's subtle criticism was not without foundation. Griffith's future war novels, like the genre at large, were sensationalist adventure narratives produced with popularity rather than posterity in mind. His books are characterised by straightforward (albeit often highly original) plots, one-dimensional characters, and unimaginative, obligatory love-stories. Nonetheless, Griffith's canon certainly has its value, particularly in terms of aeronautics. Taking his cue from Jules Verne, Griffith was fascinated by the prospect of flight, and incorporated it into the vast majority of his literature. Yet unlike comparable authors of future-war fiction, such as William Le Queux or James Blyth, Griffith appears to have had a decent grounding in contemporary theoretical ideas about flight. It is on these terms, as such, that Griffith has often been compared to Wells.⁴⁰

As an enthusiastic traveller, Griffith's fascination with aerial navigation is perhaps unsurprising. This interest was piqued, or else reinforced, by a meeting with the inventor Hiram Maxim, whom he interviewed in 1892 for *Pearson's Weekly*. Having pioneered the development of the machine gun, Maxim had now turned his attention to mechanical, heavier-than-air flight. Discussing his progress with Griffith, Maxim argued that 'a thin flat plane ... tilted slightly to the horizon' with 'sufficient velocity imparted to it' would travel easily through the air.⁴¹ During a trial flight in the summer of 1894 Maxim's extremely heavy contraption lifted off the tracks on which it was mounted, leading some to credit him as the first man to have technically flown.⁴² Griffith later credited Maxim's influence on his writing in the dedication of *Olga Romanoff*, describing him as 'the first man who has flown by mechanical means and so approached most nearly to the long-sought ideal of aerial navigation'.⁴³ Curiously, Griffith's interest in aeronautics enjoyed an unforeseen afterlife, living on through the achievements of his son Alan Arnold Griffith. Named for the protagonists of *The Angel of the Revolution*, Alan studied at the University of Liverpool, before beginning work at the Royal Aircraft Factory, and later as an engineer at Rolls Royce. By the end of his career in 1960, during which he contributed to a series of major technological breakthroughs, Alan Griffith had become, in the words of *Flight International*, 'one of the truly great men of British aviation'. Several years earlier in 1954, Alan and his own son had watched a solar eclipse in Sweden from an aircraft. Though not leaving Earth's atmosphere – unlike A

⁴⁰ For a detailed analysis of Griffith's understanding of aeronautical theory and practice see S. McLean, 'Revolution as an Angel from the Sky: George Griffith's Aeronautical Speculation', *Journal of Literature and Science*, 7.2 (2014), 37-61.

⁴¹ 'Workers and their Work', *Pearson's Weekly*, 3.108 (August 1892), 55.

⁴² See James E. Hamilton, *The Chronic Inventor: The Life and Work of Hiram Stevens Maxim* (London: Bexley Libraries and Museums, 1991). For Maxim's own account of the event see H. S. Maxim, *My Life* (London: Methuen, 1915), 290-4.

⁴³ George Griffith, *Olga Romanoff* (London: Simpkin, Marshall, Hamilton, Kent, 1897), v.

Honeymoon in Space, in which the intrepid *Astronef* narrowly avoids falling into the sun – the trip seems a fitting tribute to his father’s body of work.⁴⁴

In an extended analysis of his work, Robert Godwin has argued that Griffith’s future-war fiction offered unusually well-informed, prescient visions of aerial navigation. In *The Angel of the Revolution* Griffith understood, in Godwin’s words, that ‘once his fictional airship [the *Aerial*] was airborne it could remain aloft by pushing an adequate volume of air below the wing surfaces.’ Godwin even compares the *Aerial* favourably to the American Bell X-22, a plane that first flew as late as 1966.⁴⁵ Even in his most speculative moments, Griffith remained rooted in the contemporary theory of Maxim, Samuel Langley, James Pettigrew, and numerous others.⁴⁶ The great innovation of his fictional inventor Richard Arnold, for example, solves the problem of excessive fuel weight that plagued Maxim’s designs. The motive power of the *Aerial* is two liquefied gases which, ‘when united, exploded spontaneously’. Admitted into the engine in small quantities to work the pistons, the dual-gas system is a revelation:

There was no weight but the engine itself and the cylinders containing the liquefied gases. Furnaces, boilers, condensers, accumulators, dynamos – all the ponderous apparatus of steam and electricity – were done away with, and he at last had a power at command greater than either of them.⁴⁷

Though well into the realms of pseudo-science, Griffith’s flying machine arguably operated within the confines of the contemporary debate surrounding mechanical flight.

Other elements of Griffith’s aeronautic speculation, it should be noted, were less sophisticated. The aesthetic description of the *Aerial* in *The Angel of the Revolution*, for example, takes the term ‘airship’ all too literally:

In this lay, like a ship in a graving-dock, a long, narrow, grey-painted vessel almost exactly like a sea-going ship, save for the fact that she had no funnel, and that her three masts, instead of yards, each carried a horizontal fan-wheel, while from each of her sides projected, level with the deck, a plane twice the width of the deck and nearly as long as the vessel herself.

⁴⁴ H. F. King, ‘The Griffith Heritage: A Singular Story of Father and Son’, *Flight International*, (22 December 1966), 1058-9. See also John Griffith, ‘George Griffith’s Legacy to Real Science: The Career of A. A. Griffith’, in Griffith, *Around the World in 65 Days*, 29-35.

⁴⁵ Godwin, ‘George Griffith, From Jules Verne to Tranquility Base’, in Griffith, *Around the World in 65 Days*, 11.

⁴⁶ McLean, ‘Revolution as an Angel from the Sky’, *Journal of Literature and Science*, 40-5.

⁴⁷ Griffith, *The Angel of the Revolution*, 3.

When coupled with the accompanying illustration, drawn by the noted illustrator Fred T. Jane, Arnold's contraption seems little more than a naval vessel transplanted from the sea into the air. Indeed, Griffith arguably saw little technological distinction between the challenges of aerial and naval navigation. In *The World Peril of 1910* – an entertaining novel which combines German invasion anxieties with extra-planetary disaster, namely a comet on a collision course with Earth – the plot hinges on the invention of the *Flying Fish*, a 'combined airship and submarine'.⁴⁸ In the novel's description of a scale model's first flight, Griffith awards little attention to justifying the scientific feasibility of the craft:

The Flying Fish had sunk to the bottom of the tank, and backed into one of the corners. ... Her nose tilted upwards to an angle of about sixty degrees. The six-bladed propeller at her stem whirled around like the flurry of a whale's fluke in its death agony. Her side fins inclined upwards, and, like a flash, she leapt from the water, and began to circle round the room.⁴⁹

Griffith must be forgiven for these trespasses. There were few authors of future-war fiction, after all, who were immune to such moments of untrammelled, ill-considered speculation.⁵⁰ Griffith's visions of aerial navigation do suffer, however, when considered alongside Wellsian examples. This is largely because Griffith was one of many commentators who misinterpreted the strategic importance of the aerial theatre of war. For the majority of late-Victorian aeronautics enthusiasts, the first truly successful 'flying machine' was seen as 'the most important imminent development in warfare, since a nation in exclusive possession of it could impose its will on others'.⁵¹ The victory of the Brotherhood in *The Angel of the Revolution* is explicitly linked to the power of their aircraft. Musing on the power of his invention, Richard Arnold fears the consequences of selling his ideas: 'The next war will be the most frightful carnival of destruction ... but what would it be like if I were to give one of the nations of Europe the power of raining death and destruction on its enemies from the skies!' Control of the skies, Arnold assumes, unequivocally delivers victory.⁵²

The great value of Wells's *The War in the Air*, by contrast, is its anticipation of the often inconclusive nature of aerial bombardment. As Tami

⁴⁸ Griffith, *World Peril*, 78.

⁴⁹ *World Peril*, 11-12.

⁵⁰ See, for example, James Blyth, *The Tyranny* (London: William Heinemann, 1907), in which the eponymous tyrant develops a system of mind-control.

⁵¹ McLean, 'Revolution as an Angel from the Sky', *Journal of Literature and Science*, 39.

⁵² Griffith, *The Angel of the Revolution*, 10.

Biddle has highlighted in *Rhetoric and Reality in Air Warfare*, the bombing campaigns of the novel cause great physical and psychological damage, but as with the Nazi and Allied bombing campaigns during the Second World War, they do not deliver the expected military outcomes.⁵³

From above they could inflict immense damage; they could reduce any organised Government to a capitulation in the briefest space, but they could not disarm, much less could they occupy, the surrendered areas below. They had to trust to the pressure upon the authorities below of a threat to renew bombardment. It was their sole resource.⁵⁴

Wells's Germans cannot secure New York without troops on the ground, just as the Luftwaffe and the Allied Bomber Command failed to bomb their respective enemy populations into submission. Wells achieved this shrewd strategic perspective, then, far sooner than European and American military planners. While both authors had a reasonable grasp of aerial navigation theory, Wells was able to bridge that difficult gap between theory and practice. Unlike Griffith, Wells demonstrated a remarkable understanding of how such technology would influence war and society.

WAR OF WORLDS

Perhaps the strangest criticism of Wells made by Griffith scholars concerns the purpose of popular fiction. The great value of Griffith's work, in Godwin's view, was his unremitting focus on 'telling a good story'. By contrast, Wells 'was always bent on instructing his readers in sociology, using moralistic fables, sometimes with the subtlety of a blunt instrument'.⁵⁵ Wells, of course, would be unlikely to interpret this statement as one of criticism. In his essay 'The Contemporary Novel', Wells dismissed the idea that fiction was shorthand for entertainment, and as such, 'a harmless opiate for the vacant hours of prosperous men'. Instead, he praised the novel as 'the only medium through which we can discuss the majority of the problems being raised in such bristling multitude by our contemporary social development'.⁵⁶ These lofty goals were the driving force behind the vast majority of Wells's literary output, not least his visions of future war. *The War of the Worlds*, for example, has often been approached as a

⁵³ Tami Davis Biddle, *Rhetoric and Reality in Air Warfare: The Evolution of British and American Ideas about Strategic Bombing, 1914-1945* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2002), 13.

⁵⁴ Wells, *The War in the Air*, 201.

⁵⁵ Godwin, 'George Griffith, From Jules Verne to Tranquility Base', in Griffith, *Around the World in 65 Days*, 25.

⁵⁶ H. G. Wells, 'The Contemporary Novel', *An Englishman Looks at the World* (London: Cassell, 1914), 148-69 (163).

Huxley-inspired critique of British colonialism.⁵⁷ Similarly, though overestimating the cataclysmic impact of modern warfare, *The War in the Air* offered a typically Wellsian diagnosis of the social and political strains that shaped the Edwardian period.⁵⁸

Wells was an unapologetic advocate of promoting a world view through his fiction. Yet arguably, George Griffith engaged in exactly the same process. To suggest that Griffith was only interested in crafting an exciting plot, as such, is to gloss over the true nature of his literary output. His future-war novels are undoubtedly influenced by a specific set of social and political principles – consistent themes that can be taken as a semi-coherent ideology. This ideology, however, was markedly different from the modern, progressive ideas of Wells. Where Wells valued innovation and dynamism, Griffith's fiction offered a form of reactionary traditionalism. While both authors produced visions of great technological change and scientific advance, their political ideas differed significantly. Far from tearing down the political edifice and starting anew, Griffith's fiction celebrates social conservatism and British global predominance, preaching the maintenance of this status quo.

Curiously, Griffith's work has rarely been approached or understood on this basis. This shortfall is arguably a product of his eclectic style and his varied literary output. The thematic breadth and inconsistency of Griffith's fiction, especially *The Angel of the Revolution*, has created confusion for scholars who attempt to pinpoint his ideological stance or political affiliation. Barbara Melchiori, for example, has argued that *Angel* is 'pro-Nihilist' in intention, with the caveat that Griffith had 'by no means fully absorbed the doctrine he was preaching'.⁵⁹ Though the novel does have strong Nihilist themes, it seems far more likely that Griffith was utilising a popular literary trope rather than nailing his colours to the mast. In the 2012 annotated edition of *Angel*, moreover, Steven McClean has highlighted the socialistic quality of the new world order established by the Brotherhood, particularly in terms of land nationalisation and taxation. McClean also raises the concept of pacifism, suggesting that one of Griffith's major motivations in writing the novel was 'to emphasise the destructiveness and futility of war'.⁶⁰ Yet both of these ideas, as McLean himself recognises, are undermined by Griffith's contradictory style. Just as the racial exceptionalism of the Anglo-Saxon Federation questions the

⁵⁷ For a good summary of this interpretation see Sherborne, *H. G. Wells: Another Kind of Life*, 125-9. For a more nuanced reading see Bed Paudyal, 'Trauma, Sublime, and the Ambivalence of Imperialist Imagination in H. G. Wells's *The War of the Worlds*', *Extrapolation*, 50.1 (2009), 102-19.

⁵⁸ See Clarke, *Voices Prophesying War*, 89.

⁵⁹ Barbara Melchiori, *Terrorism in the Late Victorian Novel* (London: Croom Helm, 1985), 131-42.

⁶⁰ McClean, ed, *Angel of the Revolution*, 9-13. See also Appendix G (437-8), where McClean links Griffith's work to contemporary periodical articles calling for a graduated income tax.

internationalism and class-consciousness of *Angel's* early chapters, the overwhelming military victory of the Brotherhood arguably demonstrates Griffith's faith in war as a deliverer of justice and political change, not as a morally bankrupt force for evil.

One recurrent theme in Griffith's future-war fiction that vindicates this reinterpretation is his racialised understanding of Anglo-American relations. The last decade of the nineteenth century was a formative period for the United States in terms of industrial expansion and global influence. It was also a testing time for Anglo-American diplomacy, as the terms of the Monroe Doctrine began to be interpreted with renewed vigour in Washington.⁶¹ The gradual acceptance of America's growing power has been presented by some historians as indicative of Britain's painful adjustment to relative economic and imperial decline.⁶² Yet in stressing historical ties of kinship and culture, many contemporary commentators rationalised the rise of the US as a positive development for British political interests. Such ideas were one facet of the 'Greater Britain' ideology, a term that captured this expansionist understanding of British identity, and promoted the existence of a 'homogenous people, one in blood, language, religion and laws, but dispersed over a boundless space.' These theories would evolve, by the Edwardian period, into the campaign for a system of imperial economic preference, spearheaded by Joseph Chamberlain and the Tariff Reform League.⁶³ Despite its status as an independent nation, indeed a competitor, the United States was regularly subsumed by this flexible concept of Greater Britain.

This is particularly true of future-war fiction. A common trope of the genre is the establishment, either mid-conflict or in the aftermath of victory, of an Anglo-Saxon Federation. One of the earliest works that pursued this idea was *The Angel of the Revolution*. As Europe is gripped by conflict, the federation is established in the US, by 'armed members of the American Section [of the Brotherhood]'. Addressing 'a scene of the wildest enthusiasm', the political face of the Brotherhood Tremayne 'proclaimed the Federation of the English-speaking races of the world, in virtue of their bonds of kindred blood and speech and common interests'. Urging the new Federation forwards, Tremayne implores his audience 'to forget the artificial divisions that had

⁶¹ The clearest example of this is US involvement in 1895 in a boundary dispute between Britain and Venezuela. See George C. Herring, *From Colony to Superpower: U.S. Foreign Relations since 1776* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 299-309

⁶² Aaron L. Friedberg, *The Weary Titan, Britain and the Experience of Relative Decline, 1985-1905* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1988), 162 and 186-90.

⁶³ John Robert Seeley, *The Expansion of England: Two Courses of Lectures*, 2nd ed. (London: MacMillan, 1897), 184. See also James Belich, *Replenishing the Earth: The Settler Revolution and the Rise of the Angloworld* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 460. For the Tariff Reform League see S. H. Zebel, 'Joseph Chamberlain and the Genesis of Tariff Reform', *Journal of British Studies*, 7.1 (1967), 131-57.

separated them into hostile nations and communities, and to follow the leadership ... to the conquest of the Earth'.⁶⁴ This dream is a reality in the world of the novel's sequel *Olga Romanoff* (1897), where 'Under the wise and firm rule of ... the Anglo-Saxon race, the Golden Age had seemed to return to the world'.⁶⁵ The theme of Anglo-American unity appears again in *The World Peril of 1910*. Accepting a vote of thanks for leading a squad of aerial-reinforcements to Britain, the American air-admiral Hingeston offers the following explanation: 'I have nothing but British blood in my veins, and therefore I am all the more glad that I am able to bring help to the motherland when she wants it.'⁶⁶

Recurrent themes such as this provide a valuable insight on Griffith's understanding of global politics, and more broadly, on his understanding of British identity. As John McNabb suggests, this element of *Angel* is shaped by 'race war and Social Darwinism', and culminates in Anglo-Saxondom achieving its 'destiny' as 'the pre-eminent race in Europe'.⁶⁷ Equally important are the references in Griffith's work to Britain's minority nationalisms. The Edwardian political climate was shaped by what one historian has termed a 'crisis of nationalism'. This crisis is most commonly associated with the re-emergence of the Irish Home Rule campaign after the Liberal landslide in 1906. Yet a variety of nationalist movements emerged during this period, both domestic and imperial, which appeared to threaten British unity.⁶⁸ Griffith explores the dangers of nationalism in *The World Peril of 1910*, through the contrasting loyalties of the Irish Castellan brothers. While Denis Castellan is a Lieutenant in the British Navy, his brother John is an inventor and militant Nationalist, who sells his blueprints for the 'Flying Fish' to the Germans. In the Anglo-German war that ensues, Denis is celebrated as a war hero and true patriot, while John dies in the cockpit of his Flying Fish. Leaving little to the imagination, Griffith uses a third Castellan, their sister Norah, to pass judgement on the behaviour of her brothers. Praising Denis for his bravery, Norah recalls Irish volunteers in the South African War: 'I don't mean [Arthur] Lynch and his traitors, but the Dublin boys ... they had the sense to know that they were British first and Irish afterwards'. Irishness could only exist for Griffith, it seems, as a constituent part of Britishness.⁶⁹

Arguably the greatest contrast between Griffith and Wells was in their views on social reform. While Wells proposed a series of reforms throughout

⁶⁴ Griffith, *The Angel of the Revolution*, 281.

⁶⁵ Griffith, *Olga Romanoff*, 8

⁶⁶ George Griffith, *The World Peril of 1910* (London: F. V. White, 1907), 275.

⁶⁷ John McNabb, *Dissent with Modification: Human Origins, Palaeolithic Archaeology and Evolutionary Anthropology in Britain 1859-1901* (Oxford: Archaeopress, 2012), 314.

⁶⁸ David Powell, *Nationhood and Identity, The British State Since 1800* (London: I. B. Tauris, 2002), 121.

⁶⁹ Griffith, *The World Peril of 1910*, 18.

his writing, ranging from socialist wealth redistribution through to technocratic social reorganisation, Griffith's ideas in this area are far more conservative. This is particularly apparent in his final novel *The Lord of Labour*.⁷⁰ Published posthumously in 1911, the narrative follows the adventures of Dyke Headworth, 'a very creditable specimen of north country', with a successful engineering business and a reputation for opposing both local capitalist excess and labour agitation. Discovering a source of radium while visiting the Isle of Man, Headworth's expertise in chemistry and geology help him to develop and manufacture the highly effective 'radium rifle'. This technological breakthrough is timely, for in Hanover the German physicist Festus von Kunold has developed 'demagnetising rays' able to reduce iron and steel to dust, with which he promises to deliver the Kaiser an 'empire of the seas'. Though the British fleet is decimated by von Kunold's ray, aerial drones armed with radium bombs help to expel the German invader, before British troops advance far into Germany itself. With a peace treaty signed at The Hague after unconditional German surrender, Britain has taught the world that 'a great and free nation, when it rises to the sense of the highest of all duties – the protection of country, home, and hearth – has never yet been conquered.'⁷¹

Written in 1906, the context of Griffith's novel was the early stages of the Liberal welfare reforms. Yet the narrative offers a very different vision of social reform from that of the presiding government. The German invasion imagined in the narrative provides a much needed catalyst for a process of significant social reorganisation. Following the formation of a Home Defence Council with the task of preparing British resistance, the nation's populace is indiscriminately mobilised:

Even the tramps and the unemployed were not neglected...every able-bodied man between eighteen and fifty was taken out of the shelters and the casual wards, clad in a sort of khaki semi-uniform, given liberal rations and a shilling a day, and set to work digging trenches in places selected for defence.

With unemployment, charity, and begging declared illegal, Britain's hour of need has become her social salvation, as finally the United Kingdom 'was conducting its internal affairs in a rational manner'.⁷²

The society that emerges out of these reforms arguably represents Griffith's own socio-economic ideal uncomfortably expanded, whereby the

⁷⁰ The work was in part dictated by Griffith while on his death bed, and suffers for its sadly rushed execution. As Bleiler has suggested, it is highly likely that had Griffith lived longer the novel "would have undergone a different development and taken different paths", Bleiler, *Science-Fiction: The Early Years*, 310.

⁷¹ George Griffith, *The Lord of Labour* (London: F. V. White, 1911), 3, 44-5, 138.

⁷² *Lord of Labour*, 145.

model of ‘a small business with a paternalistic boss and filial skilled workmen’ has been applied to the nation at large.⁷³ Headworth acts as the exemplary employer in this regard. A model efficient, he keeps ‘the same early hours as the half-dozen skilled workmen that he employ[s]’, before returning to his scientific research in the evening from which he prospers ‘both mentally and materially’. This working arrangement is much appreciated by his employees. ‘He’s a reet good sort is Dyke’, attests one devoted worker. ‘If all employers was like him there’d be a lot more brass made and no strikes, except among those as does’na want to work.’⁷⁴ Griffith’s implication here is clear: the need to defend effectively managed class relations. His workers distance themselves from their radicalised contemporaries because they value stability over social upheaval, patriotism over equality, and vertical solidarities over class divisions. Though proposing radical change of sorts, by imagining a reversion to a pre-industrial system of working relations, *The Lord of Labour* demonstrates Griffith’s reactionary, romantic, and unsophisticated understanding of politics.

CONCLUSION

In his reflections on Wells’s death in 1946, J. B. Priestley suggested that it was as if ‘a vast dynamo of ideas had been suddenly switched off’. The impact of this loss, he continued, would be felt across the world, ‘especially [by] young men and women ... who have been struggling for education, scientific training, and freedom of thought’.⁷⁵ This praise contrasts markedly with the tributes offered to George Griffith forty years earlier. In his obituary in the *Daily Mail* (one of few papers to comment on his death), Griffith’s life and work was summarised in four perfunctory paragraphs.⁷⁶ Such a comparison, of course, is far from scientific. Yet it does illustrate an important point concerning the nature of the two writers. While Griffith was a popular author who wrote some extraordinarily imaginative works, he is usually considered to have been some distance from the forefront of literary experimentation and achievement. ‘He has not survived his times’, in Moskowitz’s words, ‘because his literary output was for the most part a reflection not a shaper of the feelings of the period’.

By examining Griffith and his future-war fiction in detail, this article has offered a revised interpretation of both his position in British literature and his relationship with Wells. It has questioned the idea that Wells admired and was influenced by Griffith, compared the authors’ respective understandings of the influence of aviation technology on future warfare, and highlighted that both authors brought an ideological stance to their fiction. Overarching these three arguments is the idea that the men should not be considered contemporaries. Wells was a modern man, intrigued by the likely impact of industrialisation and

⁷³ Bleiler, *Science Fiction*, 310.

⁷⁴ Griffith, *The Lord of Labour*, 5, 77-8.

⁷⁵ ‘He Saw the Shape of Things to Come’, *Daily Mail*, 14 August 1946, 2.

⁷⁶ ‘Death of Mr. Geo. Griffith’, *Daily Mail*, 5 June 1906, 5.

technology on politics and social structures. His future-war novels, as such, directly engaged with these ideas. Griffith, by contrast, had little interest in the social dynamics of war and technological change. For him, future war was a means rather than an end. It provided an exciting and popular literary medium for Griffith to communicate his romanticised vision of Britain. As products of two different ages, and of radically different backgrounds, the two authors were looking in different directions. Where Wells critically analysed the present and offered shrewd insight on the future, Griffith celebrated the present as the glorious inheritance of a reified Victorian past.