

**Book Review:** Gene K. Rinkel and Margaret E. Rinkel, *The Picshuas of H. G. Wells: A Burlesque Diary* (Urbana & Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2006). ix + 251 pp. ISBN 0-252-03045-1. \$60 / £35. [Michael Sherborne]

The best ideas are generally the most obvious ones. The problem is that they are obvious only once someone smarter than you has thought of them. Proving the point, Gene and Margaret Rinkel have produced a detailed analysis of the comical ‘picshuas’ with which Wells habitually illustrated his letters and presentation copies. Everyone with a developed interest in Wells knows something about these picshuas, but so far as I’m aware, no one has previously thought to collect them together and devote a book-length study to them. The Rinkels’ book has thoughtful points to make about Wells’s artistic skills, but mostly concentrates on what his drawings reveal about their creator’s relationships with his second wife Amy Catherine (Jane) and their children, Gip and Frank.

The Rinkels are particularly well placed to carry out their task since Gene is the curator of the Rare Book and Manuscript Library of the University of Illinois, in the Wells Archive of which most of the picshuas are to be found. Their study is a labour of love carried out over many years with backup from several colleagues. Acknowledgements are paid to a digital imaging consultant and two scanners, figures you might expect to see in the credits for a Pixel animation rather than an academic study. The collective effort certainly pays off. I’d hardly pulled the book out of the packet before one of my colleagues was commenting on its production quality.

The acknowledgements of the book also credit many members of the Wells Society who have helped with background information. As this suggests, research has not been confined to the Archive, but has extended to locations where Wells lived such as Spade House and Easton Glebe. This is important because the main aim of the book is to contextualise the picshuas biographically, teasing out personal implications and occasionally unexpected subtexts.

Perhaps the most striking chapter is ‘P. C. B. and the Pobble’. P. C. B. is one of Wells’s many cryptic nicknames for Jane, the Pobble represents Wells at his most demanding. The subject of the chapter is domestic tension. For example, Jane’s copy of *The First Men in the Moon* has a title page customised by Wells into ‘The First Real Lady in the Moon & what she caught there’. What she has caught turns out to be a bloated mooncalf, muttering, ‘Got to shave every Day, got to woss, got to tidy up, got to be nice, always mus not swear [...] muss’nt drink beer. Pipes? – Oh nasty!’ In this comical protest, Jane is dominant and Wells is her victim, forced to conform, in public at least, to a thoroughly respectable lifestyle.

Behind the scenes Wells proves to be a wayward partner. As he embarks on a series of affairs and ‘one night stands,’ Jane’s youthful belief in free love becomes sorely strained. Wells’s response is not to give up his sexual freedom,

but to produce cartoons which make a joke of the situation, attempting to defuse both his guilt and her vexation by poking fun at himself. In an acknowledgement of his polygamous temperament, we see Jane enquiring, 'Can you tell me the way to Salt Lake City. I am looking for a gentleman I have lost'. On a title page of the French translation of *Ann Veronica – Anne Véronique* – Wells shows us an artist painting Jane, a reminder that this infamous account of a young woman running off with a married man is not simply, as many took it to be, a version of Wells's affair with Amber Reeves, but also of his passion for Jane back when he was married to his first wife, Isabel. Most revealingly of all, the supposed portrait of Jane on which the artist is working is not a picture of her at all, but a self-portrait, suggesting that the true subject of the novel is, in the Rinkels' words 'his own persona or his own view of the ideal woman'.

The authors' analysis offers many such insights and raises at least two major questions for future Wells biographers. While we know that Jane helped her husband with research and proof-reading, the speculation that she helped with the actual writing of his stories, especially at the start of his career, has never been supported by evidence. Now the Rinkels have unearthed a sketch from a copy of *The Time Machine* in which Jane is seen hard at work, muttering 'Got to write his old stories for 'm now' and a cartoon of 1902 showing future critics acknowledging 'a woman's hand' in his output. Of course, these may be no more than jokes. It's harder to explain away a poem suggesting that Wells's amorous deviations from Jane did not begin vaguely 'after 1900' as he himself claimed, but started as soon as they were living together. An 1894 poem, published anonymously but revised in Wells's hand, describes the poet returning to his 'Mature and elegant Jane' from a passionate assignation. An 1896 picshua shows Wells making off up the Folkestone Leas with two ladies of dubious virtue, over the caption, 'Eh? Don't you believe it'. It seems unlikely that Jane was reassured.

It should be said that the 126 picshuas that are included in the book do not always show a negative view of the Wellsian marriage, but cover a range of circumstances and emotions. To have tried to tackle all the material chronologically would have been hopelessly bitty, so instead the Rinkels have opted for a series of thematic chapters. This was probably a wise decision, but does mean that the book lacks a certain momentum. In compensation, the authors have introduced a 'narrative style of creative nonfiction', balancing artistic and biographical analysis with novelistic description to create a varied texture. At times the movement into narrative feels a little strained, but overall the result is an engaging one, consistently enthusiastic and intelligent in its approach to its subject.

Taken all in all, *The Picshuas of H. G. Wells* is a breath of fresh air in Wells studies and casts much light on a neglected aspect of Wells's work. Let us

hope that in due course there will be a companion volume, scrutinising the pictures which Wells drew for his other 'ideal women'.