

Book Review: Patrick Parrinder and John S. Partington, eds., *The Reception of H. G. Wells in Europe* (London: Thoemmes Continuum, 2005). 419 pp. ISBN: 0826462537. £125 [By Sylvia Hardy]

The Reception of H. G. Wells in Europe is the seventh volume in a series of books about the reception of British authors in Europe. The series has already looked at Virginia Woolf, James Joyce and Lord Byron. Jonathan Swift and David Hume are forthcoming. The book has nineteen different chapters, loosely grouped into three areas – France, Russia and Germany, followed by the Central European countries, such as Poland and Hungary, then Italy, the Iberian countries and Ireland – preceded by editor Patrick Parrinder’s introduction and followed by co-editor, John Partington’s, chapter on European unification. There is a helpful ‘Timeline’ at the beginning of the book which lists all translations of Wells’s work year by year, from 1896 to 2004. What is striking is just how many translations there have been during that hundred and eight years. In all that time, there were only two years – 1975 and 2000 – when no new Wells translations were published in Europe. This is such a big book – four hundred and nineteen pages – that there is no space to talk about each of the chapters in detail. I shall look at the central issues, and refer to some of the essays which relate to them.

Not surprisingly, translation is a central issue in this volume. Samuel Johnson wrote, ‘Nothing can please many, and please long, but just representations of a general nature’, but as this book shows, there is a third basic requirement; a writer’s reputation can only be established internationally if his or her representations are accessible to readers in other countries. Wells’s work has so far been translated into nineteen European languages, and twelve of these are represented in this book. The first two chapters are about translation and from French contributors. This is appropriate because, as the series editor points out, up to the Second World War nearly all English-language texts enter Europe ‘through the medium of the French language and the prism of French thought’ (xi). Joseph Altairac introduces a topic which is returned to again and again throughout the book – the extent to which Wells’s science fictions can be compared with those of Jules Verne: ‘le roman scientifique’, as Altairac points out, was already a recognised genre in France by the beginning of the twentieth century. In the next chapter, ‘Henry-D. Davray and the *Mercure de France*’, Annie Escuret suggests that French critics responded favourably to Wells’s scientific romances because he was offering something very different from Verne’s conservative positivism, ‘something new in the name of imagination and mystery’ (31). Escuret gives a detailed account of Davray and the crucial part he played in introducing Wells to European readers, not only through his

translations but also through his connections with the influential *Mercure de France*. There were even suggestions that the translations had improved Wells's work and thus made it acceptable to discriminating French readers. In 1904, a M. Frank Blunt claimed in *Nouvelle Revue* that French critics overvalued his stories because they had read them only in translations in which the grammar had been corrected and the style enhanced. The article caused quite a stir in England but, as Escuret records, Davray could not see what all the fuss was about 'since the article was meant as a joke and it was obvious that Wells could not care less' (37).

Several contributors complain about bad translations. In Chapter 9, Julius Palczewski claims that most of the Polish versions of Wells's work were made before the Second World War, and the earlier ones had been affected by the over-ornate 'aesthetic mood' which prevailed in Poland at that period. Translations of *The Time Machine* and *The War of the Worlds* in 1899 and *The Island of Doctor Moreau* (1929) were reprinted many times, he claims, despite being 'inept and archaic, abounding in deficiencies and mistakes', even 'sometimes verging on incomprehensibility' (152-53), whilst a 1901 translation of *The Invisible Man* remains 'perhaps the poorest translation of a Wells work on record' (153). Palczewski sees it as a tribute to Wells's genius that his work was received so enthusiastically in Poland in spite of the translations. José Manuel Mota is equally scathing in Chapter 16. Most of the translations available to Portuguese readers between the wars, he writes, reached them via Brazilian publishers, and some of these had been made from Henry-D. Davray's French versions, not from the original text. These books, Mota notes, are not great achievements: 'perfunctory (and this is unfortunately the case with most of Wells's science fiction in Portuguese) and even bowdlerized' (255n.).

One of the most intriguing questions raised by the book is why some texts are selected for translation and others not. The scientific romances, of course, were an instant hit in most of the countries represented and have remained so, but some of the selections from Wells's later work are puzzling. In his introduction, Parrinder suggests that this may have been a matter of chance – a consequence of Wells's productivity which resulted in a queue of books awaiting attention. Possibly, although it may be that Continental tastes do not always reflect those in Britain. I noticed – because it is a particular favourite of mine – that *The Bulpington of Blup*, a 1933 novel, little regarded in this country – is mentioned a number of times. Translations were published in Sweden, Russia and Hungary in 1934 and in France in 1935 (intriguingly, in France it was given the title *Chateaux en Angleterre...*; I wondered at first whether this was the French equivalent of 'Castles in Spain' because that would reflect the central theme of the book, but I have it on good authority that it is not). The novel was banned in Spain and Ireland in the 1940s, but subsequently released in Spain in 1960. In Chapter 11, Gabriella Vöö records that Lajos Biró praised

the literary achievement of *The Bulpington of Blup* – but adds that he was the only critic in interwar Hungary who did (182). In Russia, on the other hand, the novel had a warm reception; Adelaida Lyubimova and Boris Proskurnin claim that it was ‘a very popular novel [...] ever since its publication’ (Chapter 4: 70). This was, of course, as the authors remind us, the period when theorists like Victor Shklovsky and Mikhail Bakhtin were revolutionising ideas about prose fiction, and in the 1920s much of Wells’s work was analysed in these terms, but by the mid-1930s what the authors call the ‘Left’ or ‘Proletcult’ critical movement had taken over (70), so it was not *The Bulpington of Blup*’s innovations in narrative technique that appealed to Russian readers, but ‘its anti-fascist feeling’ (70). This comment reminds us that not only the reception but also the continuing appreciation of a text is inseparable from the cultural and political context in which it is assessed, and there is no doubt that the interwar years brought enormous social and political changes for all the countries represented in this book. In Russia, for instance, where Wells had a large readership from the 1890s onwards, the critical responses to his work changed according to the literary standards prevailing at the time, and these were tempered by politics. Lyubimova and Proskurnin show how literary-critical judgements of Wells’s work were increasingly influenced by a sociological concern with his ideas. Roger Cockrell, in an equally interesting chapter, concentrates on ideological interpretations. Russian enthusiasm for Wells’s stories, he claims, was from the beginning accompanied by official attacks on his attitude towards Bolshevik orthodoxy and his criticism of Marx. For many commentators, Wells remained ‘out of tune and out of touch with reality, cocooned in his bourgeois prejudices’ (Chapter 5: 77).

As these essays make clear, the very existence of literature in a particular country is politically determined. During the thirties the rise of Fascist regimes led to the suppression or banning of Wells’s books. In Chapters 6 and 7, both Elmer Schenkel and Richard Nate chart the ways in which attitudes to Wells’s work changed in Germany during the twenties and thirties, and they record that from the beginning of the Third Reich he was numbered among the writers considered to be ‘corrupt’ (108). Schenkel, applauds Wells’s support for banned writers after the Nazis came to power, particularly after he became president of the International PEN Club in 1933, and argues that it was events in Germany that caused Wells to rethink a number of his earlier ideas and ‘to redefine himself as a liberal and non-totalitarian thinker’ (104). Wells’s frequent denunciations of Fritz Lang’s film, *Metropolis*, Schenkel argues, stem from his recognition of the Fascist potential in his early fantasies. His review of the film, therefore, ‘is the older Wells criticising the younger one’ (98).

Wells’s books were amongst those burned on Berlin’s Opernplatz on 10 May 1933, and in the thirties and forties his sociological writings and novels were subject to censorship and sometimes banned in both Spain and Ireland. In

Chapter 15, Alberto Lázaro explores files from the Spanish censorship office to discover, as he puts it, how the books of ‘a left-wing, free-thinking atheist who criticised Franco from the start’ (237) had been regarded by the authorities in the Franco era. The Spanish edition of *The Country of the Blind and Other Stories* was banned in 1940, it seems, because of two stories. ‘A Dream of Armageddon’, was seen as a ‘raging pacifist tale’, and ‘The Country of the Blind’ offended because it displayed anti-war attitudes (245). Interestingly, in 1947, a Spanish version of *The Bulpington of Blup* imported from Buenos Aires was also banned. No explanation was given, but presumably, Lázaro speculates, it was suppressed on moral grounds – Theodore does have a meeting with a prostitute in Paris (248). In Ireland, as Lucian M. Ashworth suggests in Chapter 17, it was not only Wells’s attacks on the Catholic Church that led to sociological works such as *The Work, Wealth and Happiness of Mankind* being censored, but also the fact that his idea of a materialist utopia was a direct challenge to the prevailing theological view. Wells’s criticisms of the Catholic Church in *The Fate of Homo Sapiens*, first serialised in *Picture Post* in November 1939, led to the banning of both book and magazine. And, yet again, *The Bulpington of Blup* fell foul of the censor.

An important theme running through these chapters is the ways in which writers and filmmakers have been influenced in their own work by Wells’s writings. Katalin Csala in Chapter 12, for instance, traces Wells’s influence on the Hungarian writer, Frigyes Karinthy, who published a largely rewritten translation of *The Sea Lady* in 1914, and followed it with his own fantasy, *Capillaria* which draws on the same subject matter. Karinthy was also an encyclopaedist, and in 1929 he offered his services to Wells, but Csala’s account of his work does not convince me that Wells’s rejection ‘deprived Wells and ultimately the world of an international collaborative encyclopaedia which might have gone some way towards addressing Wells’s demand for a “World Brain”’ (204). It is, of course, always difficult to be certain about influences, as Nicoletta Vallorani acknowledges in Chapter 19, where she seeks to establish what she calls the ‘underlying, often hidden kinship’ between Wells’s fictions and European film and television. No-one would deny that Wellsian ideas and motifs can be detected in many films, and Vallorani gives an interesting account of little known European films based on Wells’s stories which preceded more famous American productions, but the correspondences she finds in more recent films are not always convincing. Stories about falling asleep and waking in another time have been around for centuries – Mark Twain’s 1889 *A Connecticut Yankee in the Court of King Arthur* springs to mind – so recent filmic reworkings of the device are not necessarily influenced by *When the Sleeper Wakes*. Similarly, Vallorani’s account of the 1988 Benigni film, *Il piccolo diavolo* raises questions. The film features the pranks of an invisible devil. A new twist, she suggests in the invisible man’s ‘cultural metamorphosis’

– invisibility ‘portrayed as a form of anarchic evil’ (317). But is it a new twist? The idea seems more akin to the scene between an invisible Faustus and the Pope in Marlowe’s *Doctor Faustus* than to *The Invisible Man*. George Slusser and Danièle Chatelain, on the other hand, make out a fascinating and very convincing case for Wells’s influence on post-war French and Russian science fiction writers which is supported by detailed illustrations from their work. In Chapter 18 the authors claim that French science fiction has been dominated by *The Time Machine*. This, they argue, is because its central idea – travelling in time but not in space – accords with traditional Cartesian habits of thinking – the ego can become aware of itself only through isolation from the external material world. This is contrasted with Soviet culture, where science fiction writers have been strongly influenced by *The War of the Worlds*. For a nation that has been so often invaded, it is argued, ‘alien invasion is a theme of primordial interest’ (292).

The aim of the *Reception in Europe* series is to extend the reader’s understanding of an author by presenting the perspectives of other nations, and these essays achieve this objective admirably. The ‘Timeline’ together with the 65 page bibliographies provide a valuable resource for researchers, and although it is unlikely that many readers will read the book through from cover to cover, the individual essays offer well-argued and up-to-date information about Wells’s reception in eleven different European countries. *The Reception of H. G. Wells in Europe* has plenty to offer the general reader as well because it introduces new insights. For the first time, for instance, I understood what an exciting adventure Wells’s first visit to Russia must have been for him, because on this occasion he did not behave like a public figure. As Kozyreva and Shamina put it, ‘In spite of his deep interest in Russia, this trip was more like a traditional tourist visit to an exotic country’ (Chapter 3: 51). And what about Wells’s impact on Catalonia, where, presiding over the PEN Club’s thirteenth International Conference in May 1935 he disappointed his hosts, who had high expectations of this ‘media phenomenon’, by falling asleep at the president’s table and refusing interviews? He would not answer questions on literary topics, either, because he only wanted to talk about cinema. Of course! This was the year he was obsessed by *Things to Come*. From the perspective of Catalonia, it would seem, he has not been forgiven. In conclusion, *The Reception of H. G. Wells in Europe* is an important and valuable collection for anyone who wants to know more about Wells. It is a pity that because of the enormous cost of the book, most readers will have access to it only through libraries.