

Book Review: Alberto Lázaro, *H. G. Wells en España: Estudio de los expedientes de censura (1939-1978)* (Madrid: Editorial Verbum, 2004). 250 pp. ISBN: 84-7962-289-X. €15.03. [José Manuel Mota]

This book can be seen as a much expanded version of the author's chapter 'H. G. Wells and the Discourse of Censorship in Franco's Spain' in *The Reception of H. G. Wells in Europe* (reviewed above); if you cannot read Spanish you will have to satisfy yourself with that. But the enlarged treatment of the matter in this nonetheless small book which has as much as three or four times the size of the English essay largely pays the 'trouble' of having learned Spanish.

Lázaro has published extensively on British authors (Joyce, Woolf, D. H. Lawrence, Orwell) and, along the lines of Jauss's aesthetic and sociology of reception, busied himself with the reading of these authors in 20th century Spain, which means the troubles and accidents of their works in a country where the influence of right-wing or outright fascist politics and of a vigorous and powerful Catholic church were always present.

The book on Wells deals with the period of Franquismo proper and the three years following the dictator's death until the 1978 Constitution, which established freedom of expression. But it includes a chapter on the earlier reception of Wells in Spain, where we are given a bird's eye view of the subject from translations of scientific romances in the early 1900s to commentary on and criticism of Wells by several Spanish intellectuals along the century.

Lázaro starts his first introductory chapter with a very brief history of censorship in Franco's Spain, which began with the two laws that enforced it, before the end of the war, both dated April 1938, one applying state censorship on periodicals, the 'fourth power', and another on the whole of printed material — be it made in Spain or imported. These laws, which might have been thought provisional (the war raged still), attending to such considerations as the needs of propaganda and of war economy (namely paper scarcity), were nonetheless kept in force for nearly thirty years: only in 1966 were they replaced by a new 'Ley de Prensa e Imprenta' ('Law of Press and Printing'), which abolished previous censorship but recommended a 'voluntary consultation' on the part of the publishers, in practice an inquiry near the censorial committee, now christened 'Bibliographical Orientation', concerning the chances of having a book later apprehended on grounds of it being deemed politically, religiously or morally offensive.

The main chapter concerns the subject matter of the title: censorship of Wells's works in Spain. The author is baffled, or pretends to be so, with the incoherences and inconsistencies of the censors' criteria. Why is a book forbidden? Why not? Censorial judgements are shown and commented upon; hidden reasons guessed or hinted at for the decisions taken. Wells as a republican, a socialist, a freethinker, an enemy of Franco's ideologies and of Christianity, especially Roman Catholicism, was naturally under scrutiny by the censors. His first scientific romances were not dangerous, but 'The Country of the Blind's' mentioning of 'the lust and tyranny of a Spanish Ruler' (which the Spanish translation quoted by Lázaro reads 'la tiranía de los colonizadores

españoles' — the tyranny of Spanish colonisers) and the anti-war stance of 'A Dream of Armageddon' were at first ground for a veto (in 1940 and 1942, respectively), the author being classified as 'undesirable'. In 1943 the latter story was allowed without objection, in 1944 the importation of an Argentinean edition of the former was granted. Later utopian romances had several fates: *Men Like Gods* was blasphemous and insulted Roman Catholicism and was eventually allowed with offensive parts expunged, but *In the Days of the Comet* was (mis)read as the story of a hero converted to a philosophy of goodness and altruism, so the censor must have read it hurriedly and was blind to the social and sexual implications of the final.

The examples above (and *H. G. Wells en España* offers lots of others, also in the realistic novels and the non-fiction) illustrate the stupidity of censorship — and of censors. Censors are stupid because censorship in itself is a stupid thing, but they are also stupid in the sense of being mostly ignorant, unprepared; they act like common policemen, following literally the orders received.

We do not know who these men were. We are told that Ortega y Gasset attacked Wells's *The War That Will End War*, that Madariaga criticised his Anglo-centric stance in *The Outline of History*, or that Ricardo Baeza praised this same work; but you do not know who the men were who exerted censorship on behalf of the Spanish government, who gave their tolerating or vituperative opinions concerning the texts put before them. Lázaro recognises that 'occasionally the censorial reports contain real practising of literary criticism and show a detailed reading of the text, by an erudite censor' (27). That is, censorship in the case of these rare and exceptional literately informed thought-policemen is tantamount to book-reviewing; and their activity is to be studied as part of the reception of Wells in Spain. But reading what Lázaro has to say about the censors awakens your curiosity about the persons behind the screen. And what to think when a censor recommends that a book be inspected by the ecclesiastical authority?

The main difference between the English essay and the Spanish book lies of course in their target audiences. A book for a Spanish public has an 'internal' interest which permits what, supplementary to the main text of the author, is a real treat for the national reader: the Appendices. This is an extended presentation of the detailed transcription of the censorial documents about Wells. The first part of Lázaro's book, the main text, contains about one hundred pages; the appendix with the full description of the censorial files, with dates, information of the reading censor (whenever available, often missing), eighty pages; a second appendix with some twenty-five pages more contains a selection of passages stricken out by the censors in romance, novel, non-fiction (history, socio-political journalism).

Reading through these pages is like visiting an old prison: the dungeons of the Inquisition where honest texts were tortured... this is the most thrilling part

of Lázaro's book. The materials he used, free for consultation when democracy was established, are often defective, incomplete, with many reports missing, lost for good. His work is at times conjectural; his 'baffling', as I called it above, may also be a defence against what at times may be plain thinness of evidence. But we have to thank him for his thorough investigation, his extensive listing of documents, his chronologies of Wells publications in Spain and Spanish America, plenty of information for a Wellsian, in Spain or elsewhere. The only thing missing in the book is an index, which would have been very helpful. And it is not exempt from a number (not too many) of printing errors, some of them slightly annoying!

Last but not least: the author argues, rightly, that a decrease of Wells's presence in Spain from 1939 onwards was not just the work of Franco's censorship; interest in Wells wore off along the years. In spite of quite an amount of translations of mainstream fiction and several works on history, politics, ideology along the 20th century, Lázaro has to recognise that Wells is now, also in Spain, mainly the science fiction author and that is what keeps him in touch the Spanish readership.