Book Review: Gordon D. Feir, *H. G. Wells at the End of His Tether: His Social and Political Adventures* (New York, et al: iUniverse, 2005). xii, 232 pp. ISBN 0-595-67187-X (HB): US$29.95; 0-595-35019-4 (PB): US$19.95. [John S. Partington]

When I published my *Building Cosmopolis* (2003), it was out of an interest in Wells's political thought but also out of frustration that nothing since W. Warren Wagar's *H. G. Wells and the World State* (1961) had been published on this aspect of Wells's career. One can imagine my excitement, therefore, on discovering the publication of *H. G. Wells at the End of His Tether*, with such a subtitle as 'His Social and Political Adventures'. On reading the book, however, I have been disappointed to find that its author has apparently not read either Wagar's or my study (nor included them in his bibliography), though I was intrigued to discover that he takes a completely different approach to his subject.

In the book Gordon D. Feir sets out to analyse Wells's twentieth-century writings in order to demonstrate his lack of literary talent (at least following his first scientific romances) and his political impracticality. Feir does not address Wells's nineteenth-century work, believing that the success of *The Time Machine*, *The Island of Doctor Moreau*, *The Invisible Man* and *The War of the Worlds* have been satisfactorily dealt with by critics elsewhere. Feir's subject is Wells's later work, and he sums up Wells's career thus: 'He wrote a few brilliant and engrossing novels at the end of the nineteenth century. After the turn of the century he gained notoriety, not as a novelist, but as a controversial, self centered and arrogant journalist who contributed primarily to newspapers and periodicals. […] Further, his ideas and solutions to world problems may have been read by thousands, but they only appealed to a small group of dedicated socialists and were quickly forgotten when they were no longer front page issues' (2-3). Feir's estimations of Wells and his thought suffer through both lack of evidence and definition, failing to back up his claims that Wells was 'self centered and arrogant', and, through not discussing the nature of Wells's

socialism and determining who were influenced by it, leaves us at his mercy when he claims Wells 'only appealed to a small group of dedicated socialists'. As Feir points out, Wells's output was immense and varied, so the narrow dedication of a small group seems incompatible with Wells's advocacy of such different subjects as the Great War, the League of Nations (initially), the Fabian Society (initially), world government, free speech, eugenics (for a time), state planning, a world encyclopaedia and human rights, and his opposition to nationalism, fascism, Marxism, Roman Catholicism, trade unionism, the League of Nations (eventually), the Fabian Society (eventually) and racial segregation (to name just a few of his pros and cons). Among these lists there are rightwing, leftwing and centrist tendencies which would clearly have attracted widely different constituencies. Thus, Feir's statement that 'In today's terms he became a left wing extremist' (4) requires qualification if it can be demonstrated at all.

Feir's study suffers generally from a lack of referencing, with no endnotes provided for six of the thirty-four chapters (including the introduction) while he makes such uncredited statements as this: 'However, Wells [sic] literary standards were often consistently low, prompting some biographers to politely suggest that he produced "large volumes of mundane, repetitive and poorly conceived material"' (3). The 'biographers' here quoted remain unnamed. A further example of Feir's lack of definition and his need to support his assertions occurs with the following: 'A comparison can be made between the world of Wells' utopian *Men Like Gods* and George Orwell's *1984* [sic]. They are two different views of life under a socialist oligarchy. It does not take much comparison to see that the latter is substantially closer to the reality of today' (5). One wonders what Feir has in mind when he thinks of socialism (he does not define it); *Men Like Gods* is arguably an anarchist society. Similarly, how far is *Men Like Gods* oligarchic rather than communitarian? Feir calls *Nineteen Eighty-Four* 'substantially closer to the reality of today', but where 'today' is he referring to? Cuba? China? Vietnam? North Korea? These are the last remaining 'socialist republics' and, if he maintains that these societies (all very different) are 'Orwellian', he must also surely acknowledge that they are not socialist. If his 'reality of today' refers to the 'leftwing regimes' in such countries as the UK (under Labour) or Spain (under the Socialists), then surely both *Men Like Gods* and *Nineteen Eighty-Four* were equally far from the mark. A better comparison to Orwell's dystopia would be Wells's *When the Sleeper Wakes* (1899) (one of Orwell's influences), with its socialistic revolution and resulting dictatorship under Ostrog.

Turning to Wells's literary legacy, Feir writes 'The adventures and descriptive stories of Kipling and Dickens are alive and well today thanks to television, film makers and electronic publishing tools. […] Wells indeed came close, but he was off the mark and his name and reputation are fading from the minds and bookshelves of today's readers' (5). Given the three new film versions of *The War of the Worlds* released in 2005 and *The Time Machine* two years earlier, the National Film Theatre Wells season in London and the launch of fifteen newly edited, annotated and introduced Wells titles in Penguin Classics (the largest simultaneous publication of any author's work in Penguin's history), all in 2005 (with a sixteenth, *A Short History of the World*, appearing in 2006), and the dozens of freely available electronic versions of Wells's works (fiction and non-fiction) on the internet (not to mention the continuous stream of critical works being produced each year), this statement seems unsustainable on all counts. Feir's aforementioned homage to Wells's scientific romances is contradicted somewhat when he records that 'It's been well over one hundred years since *The Time Machine* was published. It is still a magnificent story and a landmark in the annals of fiction, but it is not a literary masterpiece. Neither are there any other literary monuments in Wells' prolific collection of publications' (8). Statements like this perpetuate the denigration of the science-fiction genre which has occurred regularly since the 1930s and deny stories like *The Time Machine* and *The War of the Worlds* their warranted literary place.

Feir's comment that 'He was a vocal supporter of women's rights and suffrage but he had little hesitation in tossing his intimate lady friends aside after ruining both their lives and circumstances' (5) is also unsustainable based on the testimonies of those 'intimate lady friends' (i.e., Amber Reeves, Rebecca West and Moura Budberg) with the exception of Odette Keun, and she could hardly be described as having been 'tossed aside' by Wells.

Perhaps the worst aspect of Feir's book is its poor research and consequent abundance of errors. Whilst not wishing to put readers through a long list of these, I will simply state a selection in a footnote (there being too many to list exhaustively).[1]

[1] Feir's errors include the following: 'There was virtually no middle class in Great Britain prior to the turn of the twentieth century' (12); Luddism is dated to the 1850s (14); British Rail controls Britain's railways in 2005 (13); T. H. Huxley 'died in 1889' (23); Wells's resigned from the Fabian Society in 1907 (30); Wells met Trotsky in Russia in 1920 (36); Wells and Korda produced *Things to Come* after *Man Who Could Work Miracles* (39); the final editing and production of *Things to Come* occurred in Hollywood (40); Wells died aged 80 (41); Wells published dramatic criticism in the *Pall Mall Magazine* (45); *Anticipations* (1901) was Wells's 'first work of non-fiction' (47); Wells published in *Vanity Fair* in the 1890s (49); *Mankind in the Making* was Wells's 'first major effort at publishing a

In chapter two, 'Struggles and Successes', Feir provides a potted history of Wells's life and work. Although it is clearly intended as indicative of things to come in later chapters, Feir's lack of mention of Wells's work for PEN and his Rights of Man campaign are major omissions from Wells's practical work late in his career, a period which Feir generally sees a repetitive and ineffectual. Considering Wells's childhood and his period of convalescence when he broke his leg, Feir writes, 'The idle time gave him the chance to read and draw pictures to his heart's content. His mother ensured that he read the bible regularly and as soon as he was able he had to accompany her to services at the local Anglican Church' (20). This highlighting of bible-reading and ignorance of the other, arguably more important works Wells read during that period, such as Wood's *Natural History* and much travel writing and adventure fiction about exotic parts of the world, is odd, especially given Wells's later atheism. Again Feir's suggestion that the publication of *Anticipations* 'was the point at which Wells stopped his contribution to literature and began to pump out lengthy, repetitive political tracts that were read with topical interest and then largely ignored' (28) disregards Wells's huge fiction output after 1901, especially his important Edwardian comic novels, feminist stories and later allegorical and science fictional works. Furthermore, Feir's description of Wells's wartime journalism as 'mostly meaningless political tracts that delivered pompous statements about the unquestioning rights of the western world and the inevitable end that would be faced by Germany' (33) also generalises a varied output that included his support for a League of Free Nations, imperial reform and advocacy of proportional representation in elections, in addition to his writings on postwar Europe and the question of Germany's place in it. Finally, the chapter suffers from a clear definition of Wells's socialism, as Feir writes, regarding Wells's visit to Russia in 1920, 'Many years later it would become clear that he was in full agreement with removing imperialist regimes by force and establishing socialist utopian governments in their place. As often happens to idealists, the corruption and brutality of the Bolshevik movement was completely masked from his mind' (35-36) and 'Had he lived for another fifty years he might have learned that […] Socialism would clearly be as corrupt and decadent as every other form of government and those practicing socialist states formed after the turn of the last century would collapse into rubble requiring another generation to rebuild

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collection of previously printed material' (57); *Anticipations* did not contain 'too much emphasis on the political aspects of the changing scenery' (57); it was 'Prime Minister Baldwin's 11th hour meeting with Hitler in Berlin' which aimed to avert war in 1939 (108); 'H. G. Wells was an active supporter of the Independent Labour Party throughout his career' (120); Feir refers to the 'Liberal government of Stanley Baldwin' (121); the remake of the film *The Passionate Friends* occurred in 1938 (133), etc., etc.

them' (41). Feir's assertion that Wells was for regime change in favour of establishing 'socialist utopian governments' ignores that fact that Wells's cosmopolitanism rejected forming governments at all in favour of world controls superseding nation-states; Feir also denies here Wells's criticisms of Soviet Russia's lack of freedom, especially when he tried to establish a PEN club in that country in 1934, and his criticism of the show trials later the same decade. Feir also equates socialism with Communism, ignoring the much more successful social democracy of the mixed economy popular in northern and western Europe and Canada, and more akin to Wells's ideas where he supported welfare reforms and central controls of production and exchange, but rejected the notion of nationalised retailers and the abolition of entrepreneurship and artistic and craft production.

Jumping to chapter five, 'Changing Direction', Feir considers Wells's turn to social and political writing after 1901. This chapter finally sees Feir make his first contribution to a critique of Wells's thought when he declares that 'No matter how futile Wells thought nationalism might be, from small tribes to vast nations, it would not go away in the new century, and is not likely to go away in centuries to come' (59). It is to questions like this that Feir ought to concentrate in order to produce a worthwhile study of Wells's 'Social and Political Adventures', but he foregoes argument with simple assertions such as this.

In chapter seven, 'Downstairs Misery', Feir assesses Wells's pamphlet, *This Misery of Boots*. Again, he spots an area of potential weakness in Wells's philosophy, but rather than tackle the issue in detail, Feir simply notes that Wells 'fails to provide, at least in this tract, any logical method for accomplishing his aims, or for ensuring that his socialist ideals will actually be achieved by confiscation of private property' (68). Rather than build on such potential weaknesses in Wells's argument, Feir slips up by revealing his own lack of knowledge of Wells's larger canon. Thus, Feir writes, 'At no point in his discussion does Wells allow that his proposed socialist state might be even less capable of managing property for service, or for that matter, managing property for any purpose, than the capitalists he mercilessly flogs' (67). However, had Feir read Wells's earlier Fabian lecture, 'A Paper on Administrative Areas' (1903, appended to *Mankind in the Making*), he would have found explicit evidence of Wells condemning socialisation of utilities where they can be better managed by private business. In the same paragraph Feir also criticises Wells's socialism by stating, 'If he had looked around himself, even at the time he wrote *This Misery of Boots*, he could have found examples of socialist states that

had accomplished little more than the total destruction of utilities, transportation systems, and productive agricultural institutions' (67). This claim requires evidence as I have never heard it claimed that socialist states existed in 1906.

In chapter eight, 'Setting the World Free', Feir again identifies the nucleus of a critique of Wells's work, this time writing, in relation to *Things to Come* and *The World Set Free*, that 'Tedious repetition was one of the tools Wells used to get his point across. If there wasn't a new novel churning in his head, he would just rewrite an old one' (73). This point suggests an interesting approach to criticising Wells's work, but no detail is provided for the charge.

In chapter ten, 'Visions of the Future', Feir considers Wells's future history, *The Shape of Things to Come*, and its movie spin-off, *Things to Come*. Although this chapter again lacks detail, and, with the exception of references to Leon Stover's *The Prophetic Soul*, does not credit the critics implied throughout, Feir outlines the basis for an interesting discussion. He identifies the potentially hereditary caste which the Cabals appear to head and he notices the emphasis on species wellbeing rather than medical advance, seeing this as Wells's tacit support for eugenics. This chapter offers much promise and suggests the basis for a useful argument.

Feir occasionally suggests aspects of Wells's thought which could profitably be criticised, but he repeatedly fails to follow his suggestions through. Thus in chapter thirteen, 'Modern Utopia', he maintains Wells was misogynistic in terms of power relations between the sexes, but gives little evidence to back this up. Again, in chapter fifteen, 'The New World Order', Feir suggests Wells erred in refuting the possibility of a united Europe in 1939 in favour of a world state, but through ignoring the historical context, Feir exposes himself to the counter-criticism of ahistoricism, glossing over Wells's reasons for his scepticism.

In chapter twenty-one, 'A Solution to World Conflict', Feir declares apropos of Wells's political philosophy, 'The ideal socialist utopia was, and still is, a figment of the white European imagination. It would not be remotely considered by the Arab mind, Central African tribes or Mongolian nomads. Nor would it gain much ground with the diverse races and cultures of South East Asia that were based more on religion and tradition rather than political ideals. European socialist philosophy would not register, even remotely, with two thirds of the world's population' (138). By conflating Wells's vision with that of 'European socialist philosophy', Feir discounts the influence which Marxism has exerted over much of the territory he refers to: South East Asia,

the Arab world, Mongolia and Central Africa. When it comes to details, however, Feir in fact sees Wells's political vision as consisting of universal education (including his world encyclopaedia scheme, which Feir calls 'his worst and most impractical brain wave' [141]), universal human rights and a League-of-Nations type global institution. None of these three factors are in themselves socialist, but have their roots in Enlightenment internationalism and the liberal internationalism of the nineteenth century.

Feir's strongest chapters come towards the end of the book, in twenty-five, 'Wells, Belloc and History', thirty-one, 'Wells' Inventions', and thirty-two, 'At the End of His Tether'. In these chapters Feir discusses Belloc's attack on Wells over *The Outline of History*, Wells's reputation as an 'inventor' of technological marvels, and Wells's pessimism in the last years of his life, respectively. Although not meaty chapters, they do possess a degree of balance which could have been elaborated into substantial discussions. As a scientist himself, Feir takes Wells's fans and even Wells himself to task for claiming Wells 'invented' the tank and 'invented' the atom bomb. Feir differentiates between the role of the imaginative writer and that of the practical engineer, and rejects the notion that Wells invented anything (though if Feir was aware of Wells's telpherage system, perfected and used by the British Army during the Great War, he might have granted Wells this one exception). More detail and evidence of familiarity with other research on this subject might have made this a valuable chapter. It is this criticism that runs through all aspects of the book. Feir demonstrates his familiarity with enough of Wells's works to be able to outline many of Wells's ideas and projects, but his ignorance of several of Wells's works, his lack of historical context and his ignorance of the masses of critical scholarship produced on Wells's work and thought prevent him giving a detailed critique of Wells's ideas. These deficiencies far outweigh the many errors and few, slight insights in the book and make it difficult to identify a use for the work for scholars or general readers alike.