

BOOK REVIEW: Steven McLean ed., *H. G. Wells: Interdisciplinary Essays*. (Newcastle: Cambridge Scholars, 2008). 184 + xi pp., ISBN ISBN 9781443811262 (PB), 9781847186157 (HB). [Linda Dryden]

Steven McLean's collection, *H. G. Wells: Interdisciplinary Essays*, covers H. G. Wells's entire career featuring essays ranging from his early scientific romances to some of his lesser known work such as *Mr Blettsworthy on Rampole Island*. In addition to dealing with his writing, there are essays on Wells as an important and influential figure in the early twentieth century. As such, this volume offers scholars an excellent overview of Wells's lasting legacy, not only as a writer of fiction, but also as a thinker, philosopher and intellectual influence. As McLean puts it in his Introduction: 'Wells was a polymath whose work invites the interdisciplinary perspective generated by the contributors to this collection'.

The volume is divided into three parts, each reflecting discrete phases in Wells's development as a writer and cultural and political commentator. Thus the opening section contains four essays on the early romances. Part Two traces Wells's transition from writer of romances to an aspiring, and often successful novel writer with serious social and philosophical intent. The final part of the volume deals with Wells's influence on other writers, politicians and cultural figures. The overall impact of this structure is to give the reader a sense of the breadth and diversity of Wells's writing. Moreover, we gain an insight into the man himself, for example, how he grappled with the difficulties of marriage, or how he sustained, throughout his career, a restless social and political conscience. What emerges from these studies is an impression of a complex intelligence that, while not always sympathetic to humanity's struggles, was nevertheless seeking humane solutions to vexed social and political ills.

All of the essays in the volume offer the reader insights into or new perspectives on Wells, but some are of particular note. McLean's own essay in Part One, 'Animals, Language and Degeneration in *The Island of Doctor Moreau*,' argues that the novel is 'responding to new theories of the relation between humans, animals and language which were threatening to overturn the existing dominant idea ... that animals could not possess language' (25). This is a stimulating and thought-provoking essay that, by foregrounding language as an indication of intelligence and humanity, suggests a further dimension to Wells's pessimistic vision in the novel. Simon J. James notes that *The Wheels of Chance* 'consciously participates in the aesthetic and political debates that would come to shape, then dominate, Wells's career' (34). James's discussion of the novel hinges on the economic and cultural impact of the bicycle. In an astute assessment of the plot, he states that it 'depends on the democratizing effects both of new styles of clothing alongside another class-levelling, cheaply mass-produced technological

innovation, the safety bicycle' (41). Indeed James's reading of popular culture, class and economics in Wells's novel complements Stephen Donovan's thesis in his fine book, *Joseph Conrad and Popular Culture*. A comparison of James's essay and Donovan's work is reminder that while Wells and Conrad shared a Victorian cultural inheritance, at the *fin de siècle* they were both intensely conscious of the new economic conditions engendered in an age of advertising, mass media and popular culture.

The final essay in Part One, Keith Williams's 'Alien Gaze: Postcolonial Vision in *The War of the Worlds*' repositions the novel as 'one of the most influential manifestations of the emergence of a critical 'postcolonial' vision in the science and culture of the late Victorian period' (49). Williams argues that *The War of the Worlds* anticipates the 'total war of 1914-18' and its associated anxieties about colonial domination. The essay is accompanied by a series of distorted photographic images from the November 1898 *Strand Magazine* that imaginatively suggest the destruction that could be wrought upon the earth. Published in the same year as Wells's vision of alien invasion, these images graphically demonstrate the growing fear in the popular consciousness of invasion of British shores. Williams argues convincingly for the enduring relevance of *The War of the Worlds* when he concludes that it 'provides a renewable template, a critical method for looking at ourselves and at how science, unyoked from ideology, might assist, not threaten the collective human project' (66).

In Part Two the essays focus on Wells's development as a novelist with a social and political agenda. John Hammond sees Wells as increasingly concerned with the experimental possibilities of novel writing, in contrast to the rigidity of Henry James's technique. Hammond ranges over the wealth of Wells's twentieth-century fiction, reminding us of how prolific and eclectic a writer he was. Patrick Parrinder's essay on *Mr Blettsworthy on Rampole Island* is particularly noteworthy as a sustained examination of the meaning and cultural symbolism of the notion of the island in that novel. He notes, too, how the novel ranges from popular boys' adventure/romance to 'open-ended and deliberately inconclusive philosophical dialogues,' concluding that '*Mr Blettsworthy* is truly a reminder of the enduring, the essential Wells' (108, 110).

In the final section of the volume Sylvia Hardy examines the relationship between H. G. Wells and William James, and Richard Toye reassesses Wells's dealings with Winston Churchill. Emily Alder's essay, 'Buildings of the New Age': Dwellings and the Natural Environment in the Futuristic Fiction of H. G. Wells and William Hope Hodgson,' is a particularly elegant discussion of how the boundaries between the built environment and the natural world function ideologically and philosophically in Wells and Hodgson. Alder argues that the 'wilderness is a reminder that the biological laws of nature and evolution will eventually triumph over civilisations established by humans in the current conditions of the world' (119). Taking her cue from the notion of ethical evolution, Alder offers an astute examination of how both writers envisage a future in which

the world will die and in which humanity will struggle to compete with the encroaching vegetation beyond its civilised boundaries, while at the same time managing social progress in the face of inevitable evolutionary decline.

In conclusion, *H. G. Wells: Interdisciplinary Essays* is a fine collection that reminds us again of Wells's significance as an author. It also highlights the fact that Wells was a prolific author whose influence should not be underestimated, and whose oeuvre contains much that has been neglected and that needs revisiting, even reassessing. As a result, this reviewer, at least, will be seeking out a copy of *Mr Blettsworthy* and any other Wells novels that may still be lurking on the bookshop shelves.