

Book Review: John R. Hammond, *H. G. Wells's The Time Machine: A Reference Guide* (Westport, CT, and London: Praeger, 2004). xii, 151 pp. ISBN 0-313-33007-7. £54.37 / US \$79.95 / €65 (approx.). [By John S. Partington]

In *H. G. Wells's The Time Machine: A Reference Guide*, John R. Hammond has produced 'a basic guide that offers an overview of the novel, places it in its literary and biographical context, examines its uses of language and imagery, and summarizes its critical reception' (x). Hammond is to be applauded for his ability at identifying gaps in the market for new works on Wells. One particularly thinks of his *H. G. Wells and the Short Story* (1992) and his corrective *H. G. Wells and Rebecca West* (1991) among several that could be cited. The challenge that this latest volume poses its author, however, is perhaps much greater than in any of his previous works, for in writing a book-length reference guide to just one Wells novel, Hammond is expected to be both extremely accurate in his data and comprehensive in his coverage of the critical field. Given *The Time Machine's* 110-year history (or 117 years, if we take 'The Chronic Argonauts' [1888] as our datum), the challenge is a great one.

In this review, I am going to begin by assessing Hammond's accuracy in the book, before considering his comprehensiveness and, finally, commenting upon the degree of the guide's usefulness for readers of *The Time Machine*.

In chapter three of the guide, Hammond claims that 'It is highly probable that [Wells] had sought unsuccessfully to place *The Chronic Argonauts* in a commercial publication before submitting it to his old student magazine' (35). This speculation is entirely new to me, and I think questionable for two reasons: firstly, Wells had not embarked upon a professional writing career by 1888, only publishing his first 'commercial' piece, 'The Rediscovery of the Unique', in 1891. And secondly, the 1888 version of 'The Chronic Argonauts' only ran to three instalments in

Science Schools Journal before being left off by Wells with no description of the time traveller's destination whatsoever. Hammond asserts that Wells 'broke it off when he realized it was unsatisfactory and that he could not complete it in its present form' (36), so why should we assume he tried to sell the piece to a commercial periodical?

Although the comprehensiveness of the book will be discussed below, it must be said at this stage that several of Hammond's assertions would be strengthened through the citation of supporting material. In a few instances, without such material, his assertions become questionable. Thus, he writes (regarding the degeneracy witnessed in 802,701), 'This depressing prognosis presents a perspective of the future diametrically opposed to the mood of the time' (59). For all Wells's genius in scripting *The Time Machine*, few would maintain that the story 'opposed the mood of the time'; on the contrary the fin de siècle period is generally characterised by anxiety and concerns about human degeneracy, just exactly as Wells sets down in the story.¹ Again, Hammond asserts that 'Wells's vision is one of society in a state of unending tension' (80), though reading the 'Further Vision' in *The Time Machine* suggests no tension at all, but rather an inevitable end to life on earth. Further, Hammond writes 'Whether warning or prophecy, the implication is that the future pattern of civilization *can* be affected by human initiative, that man is not simply a passive observer [...] but an active participant' (83); this assertion begs a definition of 'prophecy'. As 'prophecy', according to the *Shorter Oxford English Dictionary*, is 'the foretelling or prediction of future events' or 'A foreshadowing of something to come',² *The Time Machine* as prophecy suggests that the future pattern of civilisation *cannot* be affected by human initiative – only as a warning does the book hold out the possibility that humanity can alter its future course. A final debatable point is Hammond's assertion that 'the Time Traveler is not so much Wells himself as Wells *as he aspired to be*' (88, Hammond's emphasis). This point is difficult to sustain, given the idealism of the Time Traveller on his arrival in 802,701, his violent conduct towards the Morlocks and his merciless pessimism about the fate of late-Victorian capitalist society. Doubtless Wells expressed some of his own ideas in *The Time Machine*, but it requires some evidence to demonstrate that the Time Traveller was a projection of a 'better' Wells. Such an assertion would seem to eliminate the significance of the

¹ See particularly John Stokes, ed., *Fin de Siècle / Fin du Globe* (London: Macmillan, 1992) for a collection of essays which powerfully makes this case.

² *Shorter Oxford English Dictionary*, 5th edn., 2 vols. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), II. 2369.

Narrator, and especially his comments on the fate of the Time Traveller and his opinion of the Time Traveller's story, as expressed in the novel's Epilogue. A few minor slips relating to subjects other than *The Time Machine* need pointing out: twice Hammond refers to *A Modern Utopia* and *Men Like Gods* as visions of the future (76, 130) when they are actually portrayals of an alternative present; Benjamin Kidd's *Social Evolution* is referred to as '*Social Revolution*' (55); and John Stuart Mill's surname is given as 'Mills' (56). Of ephemeral interest, Hammond takes a guess that 'Hettie Potter' (mentioned in chapter two of *The Time Machine*) was a music-hall actress (124); my own research has not found conclusive evidence of this, though I have discovered that 'Gertie Potter and Hettie Potter' were the stars of a 1907 film, *Our New Policeman*,³ so it is possible that the latter was a stage-actress at the time Wells was writing the novel.

Turning to the question of comprehensiveness, the structure of the book actually has a negative effect on its thoroughness of referencing. As the book purports to be a 'reference guide', one expects to find a great wealth of citations to the abundance of critical material that has been written on *The Time Machine*. Instead, following the Introduction, Hammond discusses the novel in chapters entitled 'Content', 'Texts', 'Contexts', 'Ideas' and 'Narrative Art', followed by a chapter on 'Reception'. As if to leave discussion of critical material to the final chapter, chapters two to six provide very little referencing (only 14 secondary sources referred to), but this leaves Hammond open to the charge of not crediting critics for ideas which he expresses throughout the book. One critic who suffers particularly heavily is Leon Stover. Although Stover's critical edition of *The Time Machine*⁴ has few apologists, he nonetheless provides plenty of material in his edition of use to students of the novel, and which Hammond makes use of himself. One of Stover's claims, for instance, is that the Narrator of *The Time Machine* is Hillyer, a character named by the Time Traveller as entering his laboratory as he makes his return journey from the future. Few critics make this assertion (and one, Thomas Renzi, argues persuasively that Hillyer is more likely to be the Time Traveller's manservant⁵). Hammond, however, follows Stover's lead and refers to the Narrator throughout as Hillyer, but in no instance is Stover cited in the

³ For fuller details of this film, see <http://www.bfi.org.uk/collections/catalogues/silent/details.php?filmid=238>.

⁴ H. G. Wells, *The Time Machine: An Invention. A Critical Text of the 1895 London First Edition, with an Introduction and Appendices*, ed. Leon Stover (Jefferson, NC, and London: McFarland, 1996).

⁵ Thomas C. Renzi, *H. G. Wells: Six Scientific Romances Adapted for Film*, 2nd edn (Lanham, Toronto and Oxford: Scarecrow, 2004), 43, n. 2.

book. Other occasions in which Stover ought to have been referenced are when Hammond gives the places of republication of ‘The Chronic Argonauts’ (52, n. 1) (only Bernard Bergonzi’s *The Early H. G. Wells* and Harry M. Geduld’s *The Definitive Time Machine* are mentioned) and the *National Observer* ‘Time Machine’ (52, n. 11) (only Philmus and Hughes’s *H. G. Wells: Early Writings in Science and Science Fiction* and Geduld’s *Definitive Time Machine* are mentioned), and when he states where one can find the republication of the otherwise deleted ‘kangaroo and centipede’ episode of the story (53, n. 18) (only E. F. Bleiler’s *Three Prophetic Novels of H. G. Wells* and the John Lawton’s edited *Time Machine* are mentioned).⁶ Even when Hammond discusses, in his ‘Reception’ chapter, the major critical works on *The Time Machine*, Stover is not cited. Two sections of the chapter, entitled ‘*The Definitive Time Machine*’ and ‘Two Critical Editions’ mention Geduld’s *The Definitive Time Machine* (1987), the Oxford World’s Classics edition of the novel, edited by Patrick Parrinder (1996), and the Broadview edition, edited by Nicholas Ruddick (2001), and from reading these sections one could easily believe that these were the only edited versions of the text (though earlier in the book Hammond does reference John Lawton’s 1995 edition for Everyman). One must assume from this that Hammond is no fan of Stover’s thesis-driven critical edition of the novel (nor Frank McConnell’s edited *The Time Machine / The War of The Worlds?*⁷) but the method of dealing with Stover (and McConnell?) is not through ignoring their editions, but through engaging them critically, acknowledging their value and criticising their defects. In a work such as Hammond has set out to produce, just such an engagement will be expected by students and scholars. Other instances of Hammond’s lack of citation occur when he shows that ‘Wells conveys a vivid impression of the [time] machine without actually describing its appearance’ (43), a revelation first made by Frank McConnell in *The Science Fiction of H. G. Wells*,⁸ and when Hammond claims that Wells’s dystopian *Time Machine* ‘anticipates the work of later writers, including Orwell and Huxley’ (80), a claim first made by Mark Hillegas in 1967.⁹

⁶ The ‘kangaroo and centipede’ episode was published in the *New Review* serialisation of ‘The Time Machine’, but was omitted from the first British book edition published by Heinemann. Interestingly, the first book edition of the novel was published by Henry Holt in the USA (1895), and did include the episode.

⁷ H. G. Wells, *The Time Machine / The War of the Worlds*, ed. Frank McConnell (New York: Oxford University Press, 1977).

⁸ Frank McConnell, *The Science Fiction of H. G. Wells* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1981).

⁹ Mark R. Hillegas, *The Future as Nightmare: H. G. Wells and the Anti-utopians* (Carbondale and Edwardsville: Southern Illinois University Press, and London and Amsterdam: Feffer and Simons, 1974).

As I stated earlier, the usefulness of such a guide as Hammond has produced is determined by its accuracy and thoroughness, and it is for this reason that I have given a detailed critique of the book's failings in these areas. Two other absent areas in the book need to be mentioned. Hammond might also have briefly discussed cinematic and televisual renderings of Wells's novel, as film studies and literary studies have often been closely related, and the use of filmic material in literature classes is now a central element in many undergraduate courses. Also, although Hammond uses his 'Reception' chapter as a forum to discuss the essays he considers the most important for an understanding of *The Time Machine*, a detailed bibliography of essays on the novel would also have been extremely useful to scholars and students.

So, where does this leave *H. G. Wells's The Time Machine: A Reference Guide*? Of course the book is another useful contribution to critical material on Wells (could Hammond produce anything but?). Its slips and omissions are unfortunate, but they do not render the work unusable. Hammond (like Wells) is at his best as a synthesiser of material, and his sections on 'Content', 'Contexts' and 'Ideas' in particular, provide readers with a springboard to appreciating the richness of the novel whilst also demonstrating the fact that the novel can never be understood by any one critic, or explained by any one interpretation. The criticisms above simply demonstrate that it is impossible to encapsulate the heritage of critical material and the miscellaneous readings of *The Time Machine* in a single volume. And, indeed, as such a volume is being prepared, new scholarly work is being produced (such as, in this case, the 2005 Penguin Classics edition of the book) and new critical conclusions are being drawn. It is a testimony to the power of Wells's first published novel that it never stops growing, and the moment we attempt to sum up its impact on our literary heritage, new readings appear and the process of reassessment and synthesis begins all over again. It has been said before, and it will be said again: *The Time Machine* is, quite literally, a time machine, and its ultimate glory is that it has never stopped traversing time (and probably never will). Hammond has produced a fine accompaniment to the novel which must surely be read by anyone studying *The Time Machine* (or indeed any of Wells's early scientific romances) and deserves a place on all university libraries' shelves, and in the libraries of all Wellsians.