

H. G. WELLS'S *THE WAR OF THE WORLDS* AS A CONTROLLING METAPHOR FOR THE TWENTIETH CENTURY

Stephen Baxter

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Introduction

The continuing relevance of H. G. Wells's 1898 novel *The War of the Worlds* is illustrated by Niall Ferguson's *The War of the World* (2006).¹ This is a history of the 'age of hatred' of the twentieth century, showing how the Second World War was the climax of decades of savage warfare which scarred the globe from the 1930s to the 1950s. And Ferguson takes his title, and indeed his controlling metaphor, from Wells's novel, calling it 'a work of singular prescience. In the century after the publication of his book, scenes like the ones Wells imagined became a reality in cities all over the world ...'²

How did a book written at the end of the nineteenth century come to stand, in a book published in the twenty-first century, as a metaphor for the entire twentieth?

The purpose of this essay is to trace Wells's influence as exemplified through a century of reactions to this single work in non-fiction and in fiction, in restagings, reimaginings and fresh explorations of Wells's novel, and in sub-genres deriving from it. These are mirrors that expose the themes of the work itself. My survey includes a fictional response by the older Wells to his own early work.

The Movies

The highest-profile re-imaginings of Wells's *The War of the Worlds* (*TWOTW* in the following) have been the Hollywood movies, which derive from the book's most central theme: the invasion of the homeland.

I suspect that George Pal's magnificent 1953 Hollywood movie, reshowed on TV many times during my 1960s childhood, was my own first introduction to H. G. Wells and his works. Pal relocated the Martian invasion to 1950s small-town middle America, though we are shown glimpses of a world-wide war: a cracked Taj Mahal, a twisted Eiffel Tower, global tactical planning in Washington. The viewpoint character, Clayton Forrester, is no Wellsian small man but a scientist who is central to the fightback, in true Hollywood tradition. But in 1953 audiences

¹ H.G. Wells, *The War of the Worlds* (London: Heinemann, 1898); Niall Ferguson, *The War of the World* (London: Penguin, 2006).

² Ferguson, *The War of the Worlds*, xxxiii-xxxiv.

were able to accept a tough message. Even nuclear weapons fail against the Martians, and Forrester's efforts to develop bioweapons are broken up by panicking mobs. The invasion of Los Angeles is oppressive and intense.

Steven Spielberg's 2005 version, relocated once again into then-present-day America, is another dark reworking. This time the aliens don't come from space but erupt from beneath the earth, like almighty suicide-bomber sleeper cells. Spielberg deliberately echoes 9/11 imagery - the wall of notices pleading for news of the lost, people fleeing from walls of smoke billowing between buildings. Tom Cruise's everyman hero lands a few punches, almost turning himself into a suicide bomber, but he is far more helpless than Clayton Forrester. There can have been few more powerful depictions of ordinary people under attack in their homes - indeed in their cars, a very American motif. The contrast with similar movies made only a few years earlier is striking. In *Independence Day*, for instance, (1996, dir. Roland Emmerich), humans were able to beat off the alien invaders by their own efforts.

A less familiar restaging is *War of the Worlds: New Millennium*, published in 2005 by Douglas Niles, an American writer of military fiction.³ The Martians disable our Martian rovers and orbiters, and come equipped with tripods, heat rays, black dust, and some upgrades: they set off a nuclear bomb above the Earth to disable our communications. This is a fairly straightforward war story, exploring how it would be if the Martians had a go in the present era.

The prototype of such adaptations was Orson Welles's 1938 radio dramatisation, which famously caused widespread panic by relocating *TWOTW* to then-present-day New Jersey (*Mercury Theatre of the Air*, CBS, October 30th 1938). Welles's piece frightened a population ready to be alarmed, given the gathering crisis in Europe. People drove to the village where the Martians were supposed to have landed, while evacuations were reported in some parts of New York. Wells complained about 'rewriting' and about how Welles and CBS had 'overstepped their rights'. But the parties were reconciled when Wells met Welles in America in 1940.⁴

This strategy of restaging the Martian invasion in the then present demonstrates that the dramatists understood Wells's central theme: the invasion of the homeland. At a time when the British exported war to faraway shores, Wells launched his alien forces into the cosy environs of southern England itself. And through these relocations, successive reworkings have encapsulated the paranoia of successive ages. Wells wrote the book in the first place to prick the paranoid guilt of the imperial British. He says in Book 1 Chapter 1, 'The Tasmanians, in spite of their human likeness, were entirely swept out of existence in a war of extermination waged by European immigrants, in the space of fifty years. Are we

³ Douglas Niles, *The War of the Worlds: New Millennium* (New York: Tor, 2005).

⁴ Arthur C. Clarke, 'Introduction to *The War of the Worlds*', in *Greetings, Carbon-based Biped!* (London: HarperCollins, 1999).

such apostles of mercy as to complain if the Martians warred in the same spirit?' George Pal's 1950s movie used the Martians as a metaphor for the (apparently) monolithic, merciless might of the Soviet Union, while Spielberg's 2005 film attempts to capture the paranoid post-9/11 mood of our times.

Tales of Invasion

Apart from direct remakes of *TWOTW* itself, a legacy of Wells's book is the extensive alien-invasion subgenre of science fiction, including Heinlein's *The Puppet Masters* (1951), Jack Finney's *Invasion of the Body Snatchers* (1955), Niven and Pournelle's *Footfall* (1985) and many movies including Emmerich's *Independence Day* (1996). An invasion from beyond the atmosphere was a new idea by Wells that has been explored many times since.⁵

One example of a very Wellsian invasion story is John Wyndham's enjoyable *The Kraken Wakes* (1953).⁶ A 'meteor' shower delivers invaders not to the land but to the ocean's abyssal depths. Though there are faint hopes that we can coexist with the 'xenobaths', as our respective realms barely overlap, conflict is seen as inevitable in a bleak Darwinian sense: 'Any intelligent form is its own absolute; and there cannot be two absolutes' (180). At last the polar ices are melted and our world flooded. It's commonplace to be unkind about this sort of book, a 'cosy catastrophe' which shows middle-class values surviving a terminal disaster. But Wyndham's use of the Wellsian invasion trope was different from Wells's own. Wyndham's generation had coped with an immense disaster in World War II, and though they had survived with civilisation intact, they had no complacency to be pricked.

Wells's English setting also inspired a peculiarly British substrand of invasion stories set in the Home Counties, for example the popular 1950s BBC television serials featuring the exploits of Professor Quatermass. This reflects a folk memory of a time when the south of England really was the hub of a global empire, and was worth attacking in a world invasion. And since *Doctor Who* drew heavily on *Quatermass* the south of England continues to be the focus of exotic alien attacks on BBC television every Saturday night, a strange legacy of Wells's great tale.

Sequels and sidebars

TWOTW has at its heart an extraordinarily detailed account of a military campaign, which lends tremendous narrative conviction. But many readers have longed for answers to the inevitable question – what might have happened next? It

⁵ Robert Heinlein, *The Puppet Masters* (New York: Doubleday, 1951), Jack Finney, *Invasion of the Body Snatchers*, (New York: Dell, 1955), Larry Niven and Jerry Pournelle, *Footfall* (New York: Del Rey, 1985).

⁶ John Wyndham, *The Kraken Wakes* (New York: Michael Joseph, 1953); pages numbers from the 1955 Penguin edition.

was a question Wells himself never answered, but to which other authors have responded.

Garret P. Serviss's *Edison's Conquest of Mars: How the People of All the Earth, Fearful of a Second Invasion from Mars, Under the Inspiration and Leadership of Thomas A. Edison, The Great Inventor, Combined to Conquer the Warlike Planet* was the first direct sequel to *TWOTW*.⁷ It appeared immediately after the first serialisations of the original novel in America in the *Boston Post*, and ran during spring 1898 in the *Post* and the *New York Evening Journal*. Serviss, the *Post*'s science editor, was an astronomer and popular science writer who would go on to write rather good original science fiction of his own. To develop his serial Serviss sought the cooperation of Thomas Edison, then a great popular American hero, who would become the hero of a number of wish-fulfilling 'edisonades', of which this tale is a prototype.

In the aftermath of the Wells invasion, the American government leads an international effort to mount a counter-invasion of a hundred ships. Among Edison's companions are Lord Kelvin, the great physicist, and Roentgen, the discoverer of X-rays. The ships, powered by static electricity and armed with 'disintegrator weapons' (which work by manipulating subatomic vibrations) have been developed by Edison after studies of the Martian war machines. The fleet reaches a Lowellian Mars laced by canals. But the besieged Martians throw up a planet-girdling smoke cloud, and the Earthmen's losses are heavy. The speculation about how a whole planet can be subdued is interesting; like Alexander assaulting the Persian empire they understand they must strike at the heart. Edison hits on the solution. On this Mars there is too much water, not too little, and by blocking a key dam the Earthmen cause a global flood. This is genocide, of course: 'in front of [the advancing flood] all life, behind it all death', but the Earthmen do show some remorse about the fate of those 'innocent of enmity'.⁸

There are many niggling inconsistencies with Wells, which may be explained by the haste with which the serial must have been composed, based on pirated copies of Wells's own serialisation. Most notably, the malevolent Martians are giant humanoids, rather than Wells's tentacular monsters.

And the tone of the work is entirely different from Wells's. The Americans beat the Martians! Serviss and his editor evidently believed that the Bostonians of 1898 were an exuberant lot who were not ready for Wells's hubris-busting: 'Even while the Martians had been upon the Earth ... a feeling – a confidence had manifested itself in France, to a minor extent in England, and particularly in Russia, that the Americans might discover the means to meet and master the invaders'.⁹

⁷ Garrett P. Serviss, *Edison's Conquest of Mars* (New York: *New York Evening Journal*, 1898). Page numbers from the Apogee Books edition (Burlington, Ontario, 2005).

⁸ Serviss, 221, *Ibid.*, 222.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 12.

But Serviss does dramatise a theme embedded in Wells's novel, that of defiance. Even against an overwhelming foe we long to fight back, to land at least one blow. This is shown in the *Thunder Child* episode of *TWOTW* (Book 1 Chapter 17): 'The whole steamer from end to end rang with a frantic cheering that was taken up first by one and then by all in the crowding multitude of ships and boats that was driving out to sea'. And indeed in the real world the US was to fight off other sorts of tyranny in the twentieth century.

Another sort of defiance is dramatised in a comic-book spin-off of *TWOTW*, Marvel Comics' 'Killraven' series, published from 1973.¹⁰ This shows a reoccupation of the Earth by the Martians a century after the Wells invasion, with their bacterial problems resolved. We survive as food stock and vermin, and the Martians set us to fight each other for sport. The hero, Killraven, is a survivor of these gruesome gladiatorial contests, and a killer of Martians; he is a superhero among the rats. The series was created by an American comic writer called Roy Thomas, who said he drew his inspiration from the visions of the artilleryman in Wells's novel (Book 2, chapter 7), with his visions of farmed people, fattened and stupid, of collaborators who would hunt their own kind for the Martians – and of men living in the sewers and fighting back, like the resistance movements of the twentieth-century wars to come.

Wells's account focuses on events in southern England, but the Martian invasion was a global attack. What effect did the invasion have in other parts of the world - America, China, India? In Howard Waldrop's 1987 story 'Night of the Cooters' the unfortunate Martians land in Texas and come up against a no-nonsense Sheriff: 'You mean to tell me Mars is attacking London, England and Pachuco County, Texas? ... This won't do. These things done attacked citizens in my jurisdiction, and they killed my horse.'¹¹ 'Cooters' is a poised and very funny story, gently guying both *TWOTW* and robust American responses of the Serviss kind.

War of the Worlds: Global Dispatches, edited by Kevin Anderson and published in 1996, builds on Waldrop's idea (and indeed includes Waldrop's story).¹² Various historical and fictional characters from around the globe detail their different perspectives on the Martian incursion. The book is flawed by variable quality and a lack of central consistency, but the best pieces are gems.

Anderson himself contributes a piece showing astronomer Percival Lowell, hopeful of contact, building vast fiery signals in the desert to attract the attention of the Martians. Mike Resnick has a young Theodore Roosevelt encountering an

¹⁰ *Amazing Adventures featuring the War of the Worlds* and other titles (New York: Marvel Comics, from 1973).

¹¹ Howard Waldrop, 'Night of the Cooters', *Omni* (New York: 1987).

¹² Kevin Anderson, ed., *War of the Worlds: Global Dispatches* (New York: Bantam Spectra, 1996).

invasion in Cuba. Daniel Marcus gives us the fevered visions of Picasso in a Paris in flames. Doug Beason's engaging tale shows us a young Einstein as a sort of action hero in Switzerland. The Martians come to America too. Allen Steele shows Joseph Pulitzer witnessing landings in Missouri, and Daniel Keys Moran and Jodi Moran have Mark Twain witness assaults on New York and New Orleans: a Martian is 'as ugly as a capitalist', says Mark Twain.

Wells himself features in some of these tales, such as Robert Silverberg's story of Wells and Henry James: 'Where has [Wells's] scientific objectivity gone? For my part I am altogether fascinated ...' In this universe it is James who goes on to write *TWOTW*. Political and social transformations would surely follow the Martians' devastation. Walter Jon Williams shows a China already reeling under invasion by one sort of 'foreign devils', the western powers, actually liberated by the invasion of another lot. Similarly Mark Tiedemann has Tolstoy and Lenin witnessing a Russian assault that will lead to an acceleration of the march to revolution.

One of the most interesting ideas is developed by Dave Wolverton, who has Jack London witnessing a fight between a captive Martian and huskies in Alaska. Wolverton observes that the Martians might have been better suited to Earth's poles, which are cold and arid like their Mars, and far from the ranges of the great tropical diseases which killed them. Perhaps, even when the rest of the invasion has failed, the Martians might live on there, and Earth would become a shared world.

The pick of the bunch is a tale by Gregory Benford and David Brin. As the Martians scale the Eiffel tower, which they think is one of their own machines, Jules Verne turns electricity on them ('Loose the hounds of electrodynamics!'). Later, in an afterword, 'Verne' sketches a post-Martian world: the invasion 'led to a far better [future] for humanity than might have been, had the tripods never come', a future of technological advancement, nationalism giving way to global unity, and a general belief in progress. By 1928 humans are mounting a reverse expedition to Mars, but 'we should go to learn, even from the defeated'.

Another post-Martian future is depicted in *Scarlet Traces*, a graphic-novel sequel to *TWOTW*, published in 2003 by writer Ian Edginton and artist D'Israeli.¹³ Ten years after the fall of the Martians, Britain has been transformed by the acquisition of Martian technology. There are flying machines, heat-ray technology is used for domestic heating, and eight-legged 'spider cabs' clatter along London's streets. But there are dark sides to the triumph. The plot concerns the uncovering by a survivor of the *Thunder Child* of a scheme to drain young girls of their blood to feed a last captive Martian, who has proven the 'Rosetta Stone' in unravelling the secrets of Martian technology. The British Empire has become 'the envy of the world ... or rather feared by it'. The hero wonders if, 'while the Martians are thwarted, we have in some insidious way succumbed to a form of conquest by

¹³ Ian Edginton and D'Israeli, *Scarlet Traces* (Milwaukee: Dark Horse Comics, 2003).

proxy'.¹⁴ While Wells's concern was to show Britain how it feels to be on the receiving end of superior power, *Scarlet Traces* shows how even a successful war can transform and corrupt a society, how war delivers jolts of technological change that can harm as much as benefit, and how war can be used as an instrument of social control.

A more recent sequel is David Cian's *Megawar*, 2005.¹⁵ Cian writes novelisations and computer game tie-ins under various pseudonyms. *Megawar* is set in the near future, in a world in which both Wells's 1890s invasion and Orson Welles's 1938 invasion actually happened. Now the Martians come for a third crack, landing in the middle of the continental United States. A military team is sent in to contain them; this time we start firing as soon as the cylinders unscrew. *Megawar* is a wish-fulfilling game-like shoot-'em-up of dubious taste.

A more gentle sequel is 'Ulla, Ulla' (2001) by British writer Eric Brown.¹⁶ NASA astronauts on Mars stumble across an underground cavern containing cylinders, fighting machines and dead Martians. Back on Earth one of the astronauts is invited to a manor house in Dorset, where are stored the remains of a failed Martian 'invasion' of the 1880s.

The theme explored by these writers, implicitly or explicitly, is the great dislocation of a world war. Nothing is the same after the Martians, just as nothing was the same after our own world wars. Innate pressures are released; old empires collapse, new ones rise up. Wells sketches this sort of possibility in his own final chapters, in which dead Martians and their weapons are examined, men prepare for another attack – and it appears the Martians have made an assault on Venus. And the consciousness of mankind is transformed. '[The invasion] has robbed us of that serene confidence in the future which is the most fruitful source of decadence, the gifts to human science it has brought are enormous, and it has done much to promote the conception of the commonwealth of mankind' (Book 2 chapter 10).

Mash-ups: Wells and his Universes

Christopher Priest's rather wonderful *The Space Machine* goes one step further than the above sequels, in an affectionate 'mash-up' of two Wells novels, *TWOTW* and *The Time Machine*.¹⁷ Amelia Fitzgibbon is the amanuensis of Sir William Reynolds, who will become the Time Traveller. She falls in with a young commercial traveller called Edward Turnbull, and in a tipsy lark they take a ride on the Time Machine, which translates them to a Lowellian Mars where the 'monsters' are preparing for their invasion of Earth. (The Time Traveller does

¹⁴ Ibid., 10-11.

¹⁵ David Cian, *Megawar* (New York: iBooks, 2005).

¹⁶ Eric Brown, 'Ulla, Ulla', first published in 2001, reprinted in *Threshold Shift* (London: Golden Gryphon, 2006).

¹⁷ Christopher Priest, *The Space Machine* (London: Faber and Faber, 1976). Page numbers from the 1987 Gollancz edition., H.G. Wells, *The Time Machine* (London: Heinemann, 1895).

claim that his machine can travel ‘indifferently in any direction of Space and Time, as the driver determines’ (*The Time Machine*, Chapter 1.) Amelia and Edward kick-start a revolution among the enslaved, cattle-like humanoids of Mars, but it is too late to stop the invasion fleet being launched by a mighty steam-driven cannon, and Amelia and Edward stow away back to Surrey on a cylinder.

Landing in the middle of the War of the Worlds, they find that Reynolds has disappeared into futurity – but they meet a young Mr Wells, who assisted Reynolds with details of his work. The three strap fragments from the Time Machine workshop to a bedstead, making a ‘Space Machine’ which flies around southern England bombing the Martians, before the earthly plagues win the war. The book is terrific fun, with a touching love affair at its heart between Amelia and Edward, who must struggle against their own confining social inhibitions as well as against the Martians. And the intricate dovetailing of the two source books pleasingly fleshes out details. For instance, the Martian invasion fleet should have been thousands of cylinders, but was restricted to just ten because of the revolution started by Amelia and Edward. It is a fine homage to Wells.

There have been many such explorations of Wells’s fictional worlds by other hands, including my own *The Time Ships*, set in the universe of *The Time Machine*.¹⁸ Characteristically these are nostalgic homages to Wells and his times. Another example comes from Kevin Anderson, who expanded his contribution to *Global Dispatches* into a novel called *The Martian War* as by Gabriel Mesta.¹⁹ Here the familiar characters of the Wells multiverse, Griffin, Cavor and others, are gathered in an ‘Imperial Institute’ by T.H. Huxley to prepare to make war against the Germans.

The earliest example I know of this sort of fiction, and therefore perhaps the archetype, is Brian Aldiss’s 1965 novella *The Saliva Tree*, written, I believe, as a centenary tribute to Wells.²⁰ This is a kind of reworking of the essence of *TWOTW*, in which aliens come by ‘space machine’ to a farm in East Anglia, and turn the livestock and people into monstrous overgrowths, useful only as foodstuffs for themselves. There is a collision of many Wellsian elements here, including a ‘food of the gods’ and invisibility. The story serves as a parable, perhaps, of the corruption of agriculture by industrial practices. The young protagonist, middle-class Gregory, is a sort of neo-Wells, with socialist and utopian principles constantly challenged. Indeed Wells himself is Gregory’s hero; Gregory writes to him, and as the story closes Wells turns up in person to see it all for himself: ‘One of the greatest men in England is here!’ This very popular story won a Nebula award.

Like Priest, what Aldiss expresses here is nostalgia for Wells himself and his times, an age when young men like Gregory and Wells dreamed up big,

¹⁸ Stephen Baxter, *The Time Ships* (London: HarperCollins, 1995).

¹⁹ Gabriel Mesta, *The Martian War* (New York: Pocket Books, 2005).

²⁰ Brian Aldiss, ‘The Saliva Tree’, *Fantasy and Science Fiction* (New York: 1965).

marvellous ideas. This innocence was to be punctured in the twentieth century, just as in the pages of *TWOTW*: ‘With infinite complacency men went to and fro over this globe about their little affairs, serene in their assurance of their empire over matter’ (Book I, Chapter 1).

Recursive fictions

Wells’s text has also served as a source in a branch of science fiction known as ‘recursive’. This involves treating the matter of popular fictions by diverse hands as a sort of common resource from which new narratives may be constructed. This is motivated by nostalgia, of course, a longing to see more of much-loved worlds and characters. But it can result in some enriching contrasts. Some of the tales in Anderson’s *Global Dispatches* fall into this category.²¹ George Effinger shows Wells’s invasion being launched from Burroughs’s Barsoom, egg-laying princesses and all; the cylinder launchings stop after ten because hero John Carter wrecks the great cannon.

Sherlock Holmes has encountered the Martians several times, facing mysteries posed in its aftermath, for instance in the theft of a Martian fighting machine.²² *Sherlock Holmes’s War of the Worlds* by father-and-son team Manly W. Wellman and Wade Wellman describes the adventures of Holmes and Professor Challenger, that other great Conan Doyle creation, as the Martians invade.²³ The heroes’ actions don’t actually make much difference to the invasion or its outcome, but their new perspective on the familiar events of Wells’s novel is always interesting.

Perhaps the most dramatic war of the fictional worlds comes in Volume II of the comic-book series *The League of Extraordinary Gentlemen* by Alan Moore and Kevin O’Neill (2004).²⁴ The eponymous league is a team of fictional Victorian-age superheroes all gathered into the same reality, including H. Rider Haggard’s Allan Quatermain, Stevenson’s Jekyll and Hyde, Verne’s Captain Nemo, Mina Harker from Bram Stoker’s *Dracula* – and Hawley Griffin, H. G. Wells’s own Invisible Man. These heroes are controlled by British military intelligence; their ‘M’ is Mycroft Holmes, Sherlock’s brother. When the Martians land, Nemo’s *Nautilus* enjoyably takes on Martian war machines in the Thames. Mister Hyde wrestles a tripod to the ground, and eats a Martian! But Griffin betrays the human race. In the end the bacteria that defeat the Martians are an anthrax-based biological weapon

²¹ Kevin Anderson, ed., *War of the Worlds: Global Dispatches* (New York: Bantam Spectra, 1996).

²² *Sherlock Holmes and the Case of the Missing Martian* (New York: Eternity Comics, 1990).

²³ Manly Wellman and Wade Wellman, *Sherlock Holmes’s War of the Worlds* (New York: Warner, 1978).

²⁴ Alan Moore and Kevin O’Neill, *The League of Extraordinary Gentlemen Volume II* (La Jolla: America’s Best Comics, 2003).

cooked up by Doctor Moreau. The moral is perhaps that we sometimes need to draw on the evil in us, personified by Moreau, to defeat greater threats.

The *Rainbow Mars* of Larry Niven's 1999 novel is a recursive fantasy world, peopled by creatures and architectures from the works of Edgar Rice Burroughs, Ray Bradbury, Robert Heinlein, CS Lewis, Stanley Weinbaum - and H. G. Wells, whose Martians are known as Softfingers.²⁵ This motley assemblage mount an invasion of Earth using a 'beanstalk', a living space elevator.

In another recursive experiment, Wells's Martians land on the outskirts of a fictitious American city called Metropolis. The year is 1938, which was significant not only for Orson Welles's famous radio dramatisation, but for the birth of the original superhero – Superman. The graphic novel *Superman: War of the Worlds*, published in 1999, and written by Roy Thomas of 'Killraven' fame, shows the Man of Steel battling the Martian invaders. The plot thickens when Superman's perennial enemy Lex Luthor collaborates with the Martians and tries to use a serum derived from Superman's bloodstream to make the Martians immune to terrestrial bacteria.²⁶ Superman overcomes this, and the Martians are driven away, but at the cost of Superman's life. Interesting parallels are drawn between Superman and the Martians. Both, after all, came to Earth from dying worlds. In the end there is a feeling of unease that Earth has served as a battleground where one alien force has been pitched against another. 'If the Martians hadn't come, the people of Earth might have been running from me,' says a dying Superman. Even Lois Lane turns away.

It was the wider possibilities of alien life that drew Wells himself to re-explore his own earlier fiction.

Star Begotten

Wells's 1937 novel *Star Begotten: A Biological Fantasia* is a kind of reworking of the materials of *The War of the Worlds*, and is an explicit reflection on that novel and on the genre it helped to spawn.²⁷

Star Begotten is the story of Joseph Davis, a writer of popular histories, who has spent his life plagued by odd doubts about himself and the society in which he finds himself. He is in a 'world ... floating on a raft of rotting ideas'.²⁸ These doubts come to a head as his 'fey' young wife Mary carries their first child, from whom Joseph feels alienated. (The names are a clear reference to the New Testament, which adds another layer of implication to the text.)

²⁵ Larry Niven, *Rainbow Mars* (New York: Orbit, 1999).

²⁶ Roy Thomas and Michael Lark, *Superman: War of the Worlds* (New York: DC Comics, 1999).

²⁷ H.G. Wells, *Star Begotten: A Biological Fantasia* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1937). Page numbers from the 2006 Wesleyan University Press edition.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 117.

From a random conversation in a London club comes the idea that a new sort of invasion might be underway: that Martians, or aliens of another sort, might be meddling with the destiny of humanity, by tinkering with our genomes using ‘cosmic rays’. This is not a physical invasion like that of *TWOTW*. We will be the invaders’ offspring; we will be the Martians.

But this invasion might be benevolent. There is speculation that ‘Martians’ already born have inspired the scientific revolution, and will in the future advance social reforms. In a time fearful of a ‘world-wide war-smash’, we glimpse a future of a ‘world gone sane’ under the control of the Martian children.²⁹ A ‘Pax Mundi’ will follow, set on a garden world full of ‘busy, laughing people’ – even if there may have to be a few acts of assassination and sabotage to get rid of the dead wood.³⁰ Joseph begins to fear that his unborn son might be one of the new types of people, and therefore in a sense not his son at all. When the child is born Joseph’s doubts are washed away – but only because he comes to believe that he himself is one of the Martians.

Star Begotten sparkles with wit. Wells shows a grasp not just of the latest science but developments in science fiction as well. But it is a complex and ambiguous work. The characters are never sure what is real, and nor are we. We are never shown evidence of the invasion; this time no cylinders plummet into the English countryside. Even the central conceit about ‘cosmic rays’ is developed purely through conversations between Joseph and other characters, one of whom is a psychologist. We are left to wonder if the whole thing is actually a delusion on Joseph’s part, perhaps driven by anxiety over his virility.

As for *TWOTW*, Wells’s earlier novel itself exists in the universe of the later book, but its elements are considered and dismissed. ‘Some of you may have read a book called *The War of the Worlds* – I forget who wrote it – Jules Verne, Conan Doyle, one of those fellows ...’³¹ A physical invasion was always a non-starter: ‘Hopeless attempt. They couldn’t stand the different atmospheric pressure, they couldn’t stand the difference in gravitation; bacteria finished them up. Hopeless from the start.’³² The notion that the Martians might be monstrous is born of a fearful prejudice. Surely it is more likely that the Martians, born of an older world, will be benevolent, not malevolent: ‘If there is such a thing as a Martian, rest assured ... he’s humanity’s big brother’.³³

Similarly Wells rather dismisses the still-new genre of science fiction on which he had been such an influence; it is full of ‘progressive utopias’ which suffer from ‘imaginative starvation’.³⁴

²⁹ Ibid., 114, 124.

³⁰ Ibid., 124, 130.

³¹ Ibid., 62.

³² Ibid., 62.

³³ Ibid., 81.

³⁴ Ibid., 126.

But there is one exception. Wells's thinking at this point in his life seems clearly influenced by the work of Olaf Stapledon, particularly *Last and First Men* (1930): 'You know that man Olaf Stapledon has already tried something of the sort ...'.³⁵ Wells seems to have been impressed by Stapledon's speculations about alien life, which were, and remain, extremely sophisticated. In fact Wells and Stapledon became firm friends, and Stapledon wrote that he had been very influenced by Wells's writings.

So Wells's own reaction to his novel was to dismiss it as a young man's preliminary, implausible work, but to use it a starting point for richer speculations on alien life.

Seeking the Alien

For much of the twentieth century, thanks in part to Wells's influence, a longing to find life beyond Earth has been expressed in movies, TV series and novels. Surely, if Wells's Martians had come, the greatest transformation in human consciousness would have derived from the certain knowledge that we are not alone in the universe – even if our closest neighbours were malevolent. We have listened for radio signals from other stars and even sent spaceprobes to look for life, and have suffered crashing disappointment when it seemed that the other worlds were sterile.

In Wells's novel, of course, alien life does not merely exist but is cousin to us. That is why the Martians can drink our blood – and why our bugs can assail them. Indeed Wells hints, in his glimpses of the Martians, that they were once like us, and we may one day be like them. The idea of a commonality to all life may have seemed quite plausible in the 1890s, when comparatively little was known about life's chemical basis. Indeed the notion of Martian life being vulnerable to terrestrial infection was foreshadowed in Percy Greg's *Across the Zodiac* in 1880.³⁶ But the biological advances of the twentieth century showed that in fact Earth life is based on such an intricate biochemical clockwork that it came to seem highly unlikely that Martian life could be close enough to ours for us to be edible.³⁷

But now the pendulum has swung again. The science of 'astrobiology', the study of the possibility of life beyond the earth, has been galvanised in the last few years both by the discovery of new variants of life on Earth, by the revelation of possible habitats for life either now or in the past on worlds like Mars, Europa and Titan, and by new models of 'panspermia', mechanisms by which living things could be transferred by natural means between the planets.³⁸ The notion of a cousin biosphere underpins much modern Mars-based fiction, such as *The Secret of Life*

³⁵ Olaf Stapledon, *Last and First Men* (London: Methuen, 1930), *Star Begotten*, 79.

³⁶ Percy Greg, *Across the Zodiac: The Story of a Wrecked Record* (London: Truebner, 1880).

³⁷ Peter Ward, *Life As We Do Not Know It* (New York: Viking, 2005).

³⁸ Peter Ward, *Life As We Do Not Know It* (New York: Viking, 2005).

by Paul McAuley (2001), Gregory Benford's *The Martian Race* (1999), and my own 'Martian Autumn' (2002).³⁹

And all of this is foreshadowed in *TWOTW*: 'The broadening of men's views can scarcely be exaggerated ... Dim and wonderful is the vision I have conjured up in my mind of life spreading slowly from this little seed bed of the solar system ... But that is a remote dream ... To [the Martians], and not to us, perhaps, is the future ordained' (Book 2, Chapter 10).

A Metaphor for a Century

It is Wells's extraordinary achievement that in the pages of *TWOTW* he brought together themes that would define the coming century: homeland invasion, defying the tyrant, the convulsive shock of world wars, the loss of innocence, and the possibilities of life in the universe. It is no wonder that Niall Ferguson was able to call the book 'a work of singular prescience'.⁴⁰

But Ferguson's focus is the Second World War, and it is remarkable how in the 1890s Wells appeared to foresee not only the first of the world wars but the more remote second. Here is Wells's vision of the advancing Martians (Book 1 chapter 12): 'Their armoured bodies glittered in the sun as they swept swiftly forward upon the guns, growing rapidly larger as they drew nearer ... At the sight of these strange swift, and terrible creatures the crowd near the water's edge seemed to me to be for a moment horror-struck ...' Such might have been the reaction of the populations of the invaded countries to the Blitzkrieg, or later the flight of the Germans from their own cities. And here is Wells's vision of the flight from London (Book 1 chapter 17): 'It was a stampede – a stampede gigantic and terrible – without order and without a goal, six million people, unarmed and unprovisioned, driving headlong. It was the beginning of the rout of civilisation, of the massacre of mankind.' It is impossible not to see this as a forward echo of the flight from the cities of the Low Countries and France, or of Berlin as the Russians advanced. When researching my own recent novel of the war, I found many eyewitnesses referred to Wells's books as a comparison for their experiences: 'It's like something out of H. G. Wells'.⁴¹ But as Ferguson writes, 'When such scenes became a reality, however, those responsible were not Martians but other human beings – even if they often justified the slaughter by labelling their victims as 'aliens' or 'subhumans'.⁴² Ferguson points out that it wasn't just the grim reality of technological warfare launched against civilian cities that Wells foresaw, but a still colder application of science against humanity, seeing a parallel between the

³⁹ Paul McAuley, *The Secret of Life* (London: HarperCollins, 2001), Gregory Benford, *The Martian Race* (New York: Orbit, 1999), Stephen Baxter, 'Martian Autumn', in *Phase Space* (London: HarperCollins, 2003).

⁴⁰ Niall Ferguson, *The War of the World* (London: Penguin, 2006).

⁴¹ Stephen Baxter, *Time's Tapestry 4: Weaver* (London: Gollancz, 2008).

⁴² Ferguson, xxxiii-xxxiv.

Martians' bloody pits and the concentration camps: 'It is its efficiency that makes Auschwitz so uniquely hateful ... You feel ... that the Germans did everything conceivable to those whom they killed except eat them. No other regime has come so close to H. G. Wells's nightmare of a mechanised sucking out of human life by voracious aliens.'⁴³

The talent of the early Wells lay in his unflinching ability to reject comforting lies about mankind's position in the universe, as revealed by late Victorian science. In *The Time Machine*, he rejected the complacent idea that evolution will be an upwards progression. And in *TWOTW* he rejected the notion that change in the future will be orderly and comfortable. In a sense he was writing in a tradition that dates back to the Book of Revelations, in his picture of the coming days when all will be swept aside in a time of disaster and battles, and a new world order instituted.

Wells's insights must have been a comfort of a sort for the generation who lived through World War II; they must have helped make sense of unprecedented horrors – and they must have helped keep hope alive in a dark age. I firmly believe that just as Wells's work has been an inspiration throughout the twentieth century, so it will continue to be in the twenty-first.

⁴³ Ferguson, 506-7.