

BOOK REVIEW: John S. Partington, ed., *H. G. Wells's Fin-de-Siècle: Twenty-first Century Reflections on the Early H. G. Wells. A Selection from The Wellsian* (Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang, 2007), vi + 153 pp., ISBN 978-3-631-57111-8, PB £16.10. [Patrick Parrinder]

In his 2003 volume *The Wellsian* published by Equilibris, John S. Partington presented a first selection of critical essays drawn from the back numbers of this journal. Now, in a sequel to the earlier collection, Partington has reprinted nine essays which appeared in the *Wellsian* between 2001 and 2006, plus Sylvia Hardy's 'H. G. Wells the Poststructuralist' from 1993. The essays chosen emphasise the *Wellsian's* international status, with contributors from Canada, Japan, New Zealand and the United States as well as Great Britain. Not only will the new volume be warmly welcomed by H. G. Wells Society members, but it deserves to bring the work of these (mainly) young scholars to a much wider audience.

The collection has one obvious limitation, which is hinted at though not, perhaps, fully clarified by its title and subtitle. With two essays on *Tono-Bungay* and one on *Mr Polly*, the 'early H. G. Wells' of the subtitle overlaps fairly generously with what others would call his middle period, while the term 'fin-de-siècle' is used loosely to include the beginning of a new century as well as the end of the old. What everybody knows about the early Wells, however, is that this is Wells at his most literary, preceding the switch to social and political prophecy that began with *Anticipations*. The essays in *H. G. Wells's Fin-de-Siècle* are without exception literary studies. The other day I received an email from an American university student previously unknown to me, asking whether I thought a Wellsian future was still possible. One would not turn to this book for an answer to that very pertinent question; but it is full of stimulating and interesting papers suggesting that critical and biographical interpretation of Wells, at least, is currently in a very healthy state.

The volume is divided into three broad sections, with Sylvia Hardy's essay standing alone in a fourth section devoted to 'Wells in Theory'. The first section, whimsically titled 'The Scientific Romancer Emergeth', offers intricate readings of *The Time Machine* by Katrina Harack and of *The Island of Doctor Moreau* by Nick Redfern and Kimberly Jackson. It is ironic that, among these, Jackson's study of Wells's 'Vivisected Language' is the least careful in its choice of textual edition to be discussed. The phrase 'specked and half-decayed branches', which plays an integral part in Jackson's interpretation, has been rejected by some editors (including myself) in favour of the first US edition's 'specked and half-decayed fruit'; it would seem that Wells's compound epithet, presumably an afterthought, has got onto the wrong line of most other texts, including the Bantam Books paperback inexplicably relied upon by Jackson. The section ends with a wide-ranging meditation by Brett Davidson on *The War of the Worlds* and the emergence of Wellsian science fiction from earlier mythic narratives of monsters and the monstrous. Here Davidson notes that a 'common rhetorical theme' in Wells is the choice between the two extremes of knowledge and ignorance: 'Knowledge produces the triumphant outcome, while ignorance leads to inevitable disaster'. Surely this is far too cut-and-dried, despite Cabal's echoing rhetorical question ('Which shall it be?') at the end of *Things to Come*?

There is an underlying tragic irony in Wells, stretching from *The Time Machine* at the beginning of his career to *Mind at the End of its Tether* at the end, which suggests that true knowledge for him is the knowledge of inevitable disaster, but to live normally as human beings we must do our best to forget such knowledge. There is, perhaps, a comparable ambivalence at the end of *Tono-Bungay*, where, as Sylvia Hardy argues in the present collection, George Ponderevo's relentless search for physical knowledge (however destructive its embodiment) is set against Wells's own 'scepticism of the instrument', his awareness of the inevitable limitations of human language and thought. Wells's fascination, as Hardy seems to imply, lies precisely in these mental uncertainties which can never wholly be silenced. His best works are, in the phrase that Hardy borrows from Mikhail Bakhtin, 'double-voiced' narratives.

The second section, dealing with his early social fiction, is concerned – as in the title of Barbara Bond's essay on *Tono-Bungay* – with Wells's reflection of his own times. Hiroshi So places *The Wheels of Chance* in the context of contemporary discussions of urban degeneration and ill-health and of the physical benefits of the open road, though it seems that over-vigorous cycling also had its dangers: not only 'Bicycle throat' (a condition which today's traffic fumes have presumably made much worse) but 'Bicycle face', 'a strained facial expression, a result of continually trying to maintain balance while pedalling hard'. Try that on your bicycling friends! Perhaps we should all get out of the saddle and sit down to relax with a good book, but *Mr Polly* (as Kevin Swafford's agreeable essay reminds us) illustrates both the pleasures and the dangers of too much reading. Social rather than physical degeneration is the overwhelming preoccupation of

Tono-Bungay, which Barbara Bond astutely compares to Thomas Mann's *Death in Venice* where even overripe strawberries can make you ill with the plague. Wells's England in 1909, according to Bond, is similarly disease-ridden. But if the nation in *Tono-Bungay* is also 'poised for change, clinging to the old, fearful of the new, and uncertain of its direction', in Bond's words, that might be said of 2007 and, indeed, of many dates in between.

The third section of *H. G. Wells's Fin-de-Siècle* consists of two studies of Wells's literary friendships, with Simon James discussing Wells and Gissing, and Linda Dryden Wells and Conrad. After some years of ardent and more or less mutual admiration, the friendship with Conrad came to an end when, as David Smith puts it, the two men 'agreed to disagree and not to meet again'. Whether this was a bitter quarrel such as Wells was to become embroiled in with Henry James and, later, with George Orwell, Dryden does not say. Simon James, however, detects a manifestly discreditable pattern in Wells's relationships, asserting that 'with the solitary exception of Arnold Bennett, Wells fell out with every writer whom he befriended'. James's essay is in the main scrupulously fair to both Wells and Gissing, even though he judges Wells's dealings with his friend's posthumous reputation very harshly. Nevertheless, it is not true that Wells fell out with all his literary friends, at least if 'falling out' is taken to imply a permanent estrangement. He never fell out with Gissing, whatever might have happened but for the latter's untimely death, and the great majority of his famous quarrels were eventually made up. G. K. Chesterton, Ford Madox Ford, Bernard Shaw and Beatrice Webb, as well as his ex-lovers Rebecca West and Dorothy Richardson, could all testify to this. The truth is that we expect our writers to be outspoken individualists, and very few 'great literary friendships' are trouble-free, or would still be much remembered if they had been. Wells's capacity for significant quarrelling is, quite rightly, one of the reasons why he remains such a compelling and engaging literary personality. These essays, too, are none the worse for provoking lively discussion and disagreement, and they set a standard that I hope the twenty-first century *Wellsian* will continue to live up to.