

BOOK REVIEW: H. G. Wells, *Things to Come: A Critical Edition of the 1935 London First Edition, with an Introduction and Appendices*, ed. Leon Stover (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2007), x + 261 pp., ISBN 9780786430383, HB US\$38.50. [John S. Partington]

Things to Come is the late Leon Stover's ninth and final volume in 'The Annotated H. G. Wells Series' (1996-2007). With this volume Stover has gone full circle, returning to the subject of his first critical work on Wells, *The Prophetic Soul: A Reading of H. G. Wells's Things to Come*, published by McFarland in 1987. This *Things to Come* is the film-story of 1935, not to be confused with Wells's earlier film-treatment, *Whither Mankind?* (1934), the later shooting script for the film, or the film itself, although Stover maintains that Wells was so actively involved in the day-to-day making of the film that this film-story may usefully be used to criticise the film itself, as 'every detail in the film itself relates directly to the film story: H. G. Wells is the commanding intelligence behind both. The published story served as a sufficient shooting script, upon which he improvised. Korda had such faith in Wells as a great man of letters that he allowed him to direct the director, William Cameron Menzies'. Indeed, so reliable is *Things to Come* as the source text for the film, according to Stover, that in his critical introduction and his many footnotes to the text, he intersperses quotations from *Whither Mankind?* and the film's shooting script to support his interpretation of the text itself – and all the differences he observes between the three texts and the film Stover puts down to Wells's personal changes rather than those of others working on the production.

In his critical introduction to the book, Stover reiterates what he considers to be the running commentary through all of Wells's corpus, namely Wells's promotion of 'Wellsism', the ideology of Henri Saint-Simon brought into the twentieth century. In Stover's view this ideology, like that of Edward Bellamy, Nazism and Soviet Communism, advocates the suppression of liberal democracy in favour of a managerial collectivism in which oppositional voices are silenced and society is run like a machine, creating and meeting demand through the control of a minority of technocrats and the labour of the remaining majority. Wellsism is the antithesis of Marxism, as the latter is populist and democratic in nature as against Wells's anti-democratic elitism. As occurs in the earlier volumes of 'The Annotated H. G. Wells', Stover redefines Soviet Communism as Saint-Simonism though using Marxism as a cover story; Wells was fully aware of this as 'he argued with both Lenin and Stalin, telling them that the world revolution was doomed if they kept talking it up as a project of Marxist socialism. The only workable brand of socialism is Wellsism, which is Communism minus Marx'.

Although unconvincing, Stover is amusing when writing of political ideology. He is prone, however, to embarrass himself through his lack of knowledge of actual events. Thus, he writes regarding Wells: 'Very much a man of the Left he got to be known as that through the agency of the Left Book Club founded by London publisher Victor Gollancz (1893-1967) in 1936. More than a book club, it was a social movement "to convert people on a large scale to

socialism and pacifism.” It sold millions of books, swelling the royalties of the Club’s premier author although Wells himself never equated socialism with pacifism’. Aside from Wells’s relationship with pacifism being somewhat less clear-cut than Stover allows for, Wells never published through the Left Book Club (his three Gollancz titles were not part of that series) and, to be sure, it did not take until 1936 for Wells to be associated with ‘the Left’ (his Fabian membership during the Edwardian period and his Labour Party candidature of the early 1920s being obvious correctives to this assertion). Stover repeats his error, and compounds it, when he writes, ‘In Britain mass rallies for the Popular Front were raised by none other than Victor Gollancz whose Left Book Club claimed H. G. Wells for its cause. Perversely Wells did not agree’. Although Wells was rarely comfortable supporting left parliamentary parties, he did give some support to Popular Frontism in Spain and France in the 1930s, and in other periods he advocated an anti-Conservative coalition (mid-1920s) and Labour-Communist cooperation (1945).

As to Stover’s ideological reading of *Things to Come*, and the flaws contained therein, reviews of his earlier ‘Annotated H. G. Wells’ volumes have been over this time and time again, in the *Wellsian* and elsewhere, and it is unnecessary to expend energy doing so again for this volume. For, as Stover himself writes, ‘*Things to Come* is very much a digest of everything gone before in Wells. Likewise it may be said that the present volume is a digest of the previous titles in the annotated series’. Read my conclusions on them and you will understand my thoughts on this final volume in the series.

Leon Stover was a Wells scholar of a singular type. Although his critical works were sprinkled with factual errors and he occasionally used information out of context, he nonetheless demonstrated how possible it is to use the same source texts as an abundance of other scholars, and yet arrive at wholly unique critical interpretations. The problem present and future scholars must face is the fact that Stover could have eliminated his factual errors, he could have relied solely upon using information within its correct (historical, political, etc.) context,¹ and still presented a critically convincing case that Wells was a Saint-Simonian, allied ideologically with Nazism and Stalinism. Asserting that this blatantly wasn’t the case (as it wasn’t) is not a sufficient response in scholarship – Stover’s critical texts are abroad and are being used trustfully by students and scholars (see, for example, Don G. Smith’s *H. G. Wells on Film* [McFarland 2002]). Stover’s editions must be critically confronted and readers must be disabused of his skewed interpretations through alternative readings which more closely represent what Wells actually believed and promoted. An ideal opportunity to redress Stover’s interpretation of *The Time Machine*, for instance, occurred when John Hammond

¹ The errors often identified in Stover’s scholarship were not, I believe, deliberate misstatements to make his point – on the contrary, I think Stover was so convinced of his thesis that he saw evidence of it everywhere in Wells, and he wanted his readers to see it too.

published his *H. G. Wells's The Time Machine* (Praeger 2004); however, in that volume, which is subtitled 'A Reference Guide', Hammond does not once mention Stover's 1996 critical edition of the novel, though he does mention a number of other critical texts, some of which were already out of print when Hammond went to press. I can guess what Hammond thinks of Stover's reading of *The Time Machine*, and I can guess why Hammond dodged a critical confrontation, but his silence on Stover does not discredit Stover's interpretations – it, instead, leaves readers to believe (wrongfully) that Hammond was ignorant of Stover's work, and does not prevent readers from innocently taking up Stover's critical texts and running with his ideas. The role of the scholar must be to confront such works as Stover's critical editions and educate others as to their flaws and misreadings. Otherwise we run the risk of a generation of students being versed in Stover's partisan interpretations of Wells's works and Wells's thought, and what a disaster that would be for the H. G. Wells Society, and an abuse of its stated mission.

There will no doubt be many more opportunities for scholars to confront Stover's readings of Wells's works, especially his early scientific romances. Let those scholars take heed of my warnings above, and produce thoroughgoing critical interpretations of Wells's works which will confront Stover's readings and produce fresh, new interpretations within the context of Wells's cultural-historical period, as well as within the larger body of his work.