

H. G. WELLS AND NATURE, ED. BARBARA KISER, INTRO. SIMON J. JAMES (MACMILLAN PUBLISHERS, 2016) DIGITAL (PDF) \$7.99 [JEREMY WITHERS]

Over the course of fifty years – from 1894, when he was still an unknown, struggling writer, to 1944, when he was a world-renowned public intellectual – H. G. Wells contributed over twenty pieces to the prestigious British science journal *Nature*. Taking into account the fact that today *Nature* is considered among the most cited scientific journals in the world, Wells’s occasional presence in its pages is quite impressive indeed. Wells’s contributions – as should be of little surprise, given the publishing venue – focused mainly on issues of science education and reviews of scientific books. With the ongoing clamour for more learning of Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematical (STEM) subjects in our schools, these musings by Wells on science education and how it ought to be carried out feel as relevant as ever. In addition to education-related articles, among the more noteworthy and memorable pieces included here are ‘The Discovery of the Future’, the text of Wells’s 1902 lecture that he originally delivered at the Royal Institution in which he argues for the knowability of the future, and ‘The Idea of a World Encyclopaedia’, a 1936 essay in which (as Simon J. James describes it in his essay included in this collection) Wells ‘imagined something like a World State-sponsored Wikipedia’ (8).

Accompanying Wells’s own contributions, this collection also contains two other sections. The second section consists of reviews of Wells’s works published in *Nature*. This section is particularly revealing for it provides a useful window into how Wells’s fiction and nonfiction were read and received by scientists. The reviewers harshly criticise his early science textbooks for being inaccurate and crude. However, his fiction – especially the early scientific romances like *The Time Machine* and *The War of the Worlds* – receive high praise for their creative and knowledgeable use of science, as well as their value in ‘attract[ing] attention to work that is being done’ by scientists (71). When writing of *The First Men in the Moon*, the anonymous reviewer exclaims that ‘it is worth reading the book with minute care to see if one cannot catch Mr. Wells in any little scientific slip’ (72). Such emphasis on scientific accuracy is interesting, given that the debate as to whether science fiction needs to maintain scientific accuracy has been unfolding since the genre’s inception.

Miscellany ‘by and about Wells’ comprises the third section of this anthology. Here, we find an obituary for Wells by the long-time *Nature*

editor Richard Gregory, some reviews of biographies on Wells, and reports on a few of Wells's more newsworthy actions in the 1920s, such as his visit to the Soviet Union and his candidacy for a Labour Party representative. Most interestingly, we see in this section Wells refusing to condemn the people responsible for the ban on teaching evolution in the American state of Tennessee, for he sees a similarly benighted attitude toward science and reason in the British government's policies on contraception. 'I submit', Wells writes, 'that the *élite* of British science have no case against the State of Tennessee until they have done something to put our own house in order' (133). With such a stance, Wells's diverse interests in feminism, social class, government, religion, and science powerfully converge.

Despite how interesting and useful this new anthology is, its necessity is up for debate, however. John S. Partington has already edited a book titled *H. G. Wells in Nature, 1893-1946: A Reception Reader* (Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang, 2008). The two collections – the earlier one by Partington and this new one edited by Kiser – include almost exactly the same contents with only a very few different selections in each one (for example, Simon J. James's wonderful essay in *Nature* is not included in the earlier anthology). But Partington's is clearly the superior scholarly resource: his anthology includes a robust introduction to each section and explanatory footnotes throughout the pieces. There is also a bibliography in the back and an appendix of short biographies on all of the people mentioned in the various articles. This new e-book collection, however, contains none of the above scholarly aids and is merely a reprint of the original pages of the articles (which often translates to a lot of superfluous, at times distracting, material by other authors which is unrelated to Wells appearing on the same page as Wells's material). However, the new e-book clearly has one advantage: price. Partington's book is listed online at around \$75, whereas the new e-book is less than \$10.

In sum, both Partington's and Kiser's collections go a long way toward giving readers a valuable glimpse into what Wells thought about science and scientists and, in turn, what those scientists thought about Wells. We see coming sharply into focus a Wells who was deeply concerned throughout his life with how schools were teaching science and with how much the general public was being exposed to new work being done in the sciences. But given the excellent work that Partington put into his earlier anthology on Wells and *Nature*, this new e-book does feel a bit redundant and much more hastily put together.