

Book Review: Glenn Yeffeth, ed., *The War of the Worlds: Fresh Perspectives on the H. G. Wells Classic* (Dallas: Benbella, 2005). vi, 292 pp. ISBN 1-932100-55-5. US\$17.95, Can\$25.95. [John S. Partington]

This volume, published to coincide with the release of the three film versions of *The War of the Worlds*, consists of the full text of Wells's scientific romance and fourteen essays discussing the story and its influence. While some of the essayists have reputations as literary critics (Stephen Baxter, Jack Williamson, George Zebrowski), they are all authors of science fiction and / or fantasy, as the trumpeting of their many Hugo Awards, Campbell Awards, Clarke Awards, etc., testify.

In his 'Introduction', Robert Silverberg presents a brief history of Wells's writing career before introducing the major themes of *The War of the Worlds*. His homage is concisely expressed in the assertion that 'it's possible to discern the hand of Wells behind almost every one of the major themes of modern science fiction' (1). Following this essay, the volume contains the full text of *The War of the Worlds*. This placing of the text would be salutary if it were not for the fact that Silverberg's essay gives away the ending and several key aspects of the story. A more

ambiguous introduction might have made sense, with more revelatory critical essays to follow the story in the collection.

The first essay proper of the collection is Robert Charles Wilson's 'The Night Wind and the Morning Star'. This piece is largely made up of Wilson's reminiscences of the effect of George Pal's 1953 film version of *The War of the Worlds* on his prepubescent self, and how it inspired him to create alien worlds and take an interest in the unmanned NASA explorations of Mars in recent years. For all that it is a personal essay, Wilson makes a couple of incisive observations, such as this regarding the difference between Jules Verne's and Wells's contribution to science fiction writing: 'Verne, anticipating submarines and powered aircraft from the age of the gaslight, knew that technology changes with time. But Wells knew something infinitely more profound. He knew that *everything* changes' (154); or the assertion that the Martians of Wells's story 'are overthrown [...] by their own complacency, by their serene assurance of their empire over matter, by their inability to think un-Martian thoughts' (157) – a point often made about the human victims rather than the alien aggressors.

In 'Just Who were those Martians, Anyway?', Lawrence Watt-Evans sets out to challenged the narrator's view that the Martians are intellectually superior to humans. In points which suggest familiarity with Patrick Parrinder's 1999 *Foundation* essay, 'How Far Can We Trust the Narrator of *The War of the Worlds*?', Watt-Evans rejects the notion that the Martian military campaign in south-east England demonstrates their 'sublime confidence' in favour of the theory that it rather reflects their 'reckless bloodthirsty stupidity' (166). Their ignorance is further highlighted by the fact that, in chapter four of the book, a Martian literally falls from its cylinder, suggesting not only that the invaders know nothing of Earth's higher gravity, but that they have not even brought ladders with them! The invasion force of a mere ten cylinders is slight in terms of conquest potential, and the attackers apparently have no way of returning to Mars or even sending information back to their home planet. To Watt-Evans, 'all the evidence indicates that they *did not want these people back*' (167). The author concludes that 'these were not an invasion fleet. My theory [...] is that they were exiles, sent to Earth (and later Venus) to get them off Mars' (167).

In Pamela Sargent's 'The Martians Among Us', the author discusses the impact of the novel on her childish mind in the Cold War America of the late-1950s, early-1960s before

considering more recent events, post-9/11. Her point that ‘Wells’ narrator muses on the knowledge that space will no longer protect the Earth, just as Americans have been forcefully reminded that oceans won’t protect us’ (178) concludes an essay that hails the longevity of *The War of the Worlds* while also mourning the fact that it remains as relevant today as it did in Wells’s own time.

In ‘H. G. Wells’ Enduring Mythos of Mars’, Stephen Baxter charts the history of Martian science fiction from *The War of the Worlds* to the present, considering the influence of the growing astronomical knowledge concerning the red planet on writers of the genre (beginning with the impact of Giovanni Schiaparelli’s and Percival Lowell’s writings on Wells’s work). Baxter is the only author in the anthology to mention the German work *Auf Zwei Planeten* (1897), though despite that work appearing a year before Wells’s book, Baxter seems to credit Wells as the pioneer: ‘Once Wells had opened the floodgates, the Martian invaders kept on coming. The Martians of *Two Planets* by Kurd Lasswitz come to Earth to create a utopia, but most invaders were less benign’ (183). This denial to Lasswitz of precedent is a regular feature of essays concerning stories about Mars and, while it seems certain that Wells knew nothing of Lasswitz when writing *The War of the Worlds* (an English-language edition of *Auf Zwei Planeten* only appeared in 1971), this Anglo-centricity is really unacceptable in twenty-first century criticism.

Jack Williamson’s ‘The Evolution of the Martians’ provides a background to the late-Victorian England in which Wells was living and narrates Wells’s early career before offering descriptions of some of the scenes in *The War of the Worlds*. In David Gerrold’s ‘Wars of the Worlds’, we receive a history of *The War of the Worlds*’ radio, film and literary progeny, including reference to ‘an immediate (and unauthorised) “sequel”’. Six weeks after *The War of the Worlds* was published, *Edison’s Conquest of Mar* appeared as a serial in a New York newspaper [the *New York Evening Journal*]. The story [by Garrett P. Serviss] portrayed the famous inventor Thomas Alva Edison as the leader of an expeditionary force to counterattack the Martians’ (204). Nothing in Gerrold’s essay is new, and indeed most of what he writes about the radio versions of the story were recently described in greater detail in Robert E. Bartholomew and Hilary Evans’s *Panic Attacks: Media Manipulation and Mass Delusion* (2004) – curiously, Gerrold notes the infrequency of channel-surfing during the Orson Welles radio play, which is flatly contradicted by Fred Saberhagen’s essay, ‘Wells, Welles, Well!, or Who Called the Martians Down?’, which

claims Welles's show picked up many listeners when the rival *Chase and Sanborn Hour* went into a musical interlude. Both of these essays replicate (in lesser detail) facts better organised and presented in *The Complete War of the Worlds: Mars' Invasion of Earth from H. G. Wells to Orson Welles* (2001), edited by Brian Holmsten and Alex Lubertozzi.

Mercedes Lackey, in 'In Woking's Image', sets out to portray the average contemporary reader of *The War of the Worlds* and what his (she asserts it would be a man) living environment would be like. This essay is the least satisfying in the volume (aside from three of the last four, but see below for reasons) for, while most lack an academic edge or original insights, Lackey's piece is full of unbelievable assertion presented as fact. I will quote just two instances of far-fetched assertion, both regarding the likely readership of the story: 'To begin with, you, the late-Victorian reader of H. G. Wells' "scientific romances," are probably male, and when I say "probably," I mean the likelihood you are female is less than five percent. These were not the sort of books that women read. Even at the turn of the century, "good girls" and "proper women" weren't to trouble their minds with such wild speculations' (217); 'You are probably middle-class; the working class, while not entirely illiterate, was still too busy laboring at twelve- to sixteen-hour days, seven days a week (half the day off on Sunday, perhaps, to attend church or chapel), to have time to read' (217-18). These assertions about women and the working class in the Woking of 1898 are simply ridiculous, and many more such assertions follow in Lackey's essay.

In 'The Fear of the Worlds', George Zebrowski considers the relevance of Wells's *The War of the Worlds* for the subsequent science fiction genre and for readers today, concluding that the (now) dated setting, as interesting as it may still be, must be taken by readers as garnish to the moral message in the book which remains as relevant today as it did in 1898. As he states, 'The blood-red "reality" of *The War of the Worlds* had emerged in the new weapons of World War I, and in how the colonial powers continued to treat Third World peoples as "slopes," "gooks," "ragheads" and "hajjis" – demote them and you can kill them with little or no concern, which is how the Martians exterminated human beings, as one steps into a nest of ants' (236). Zebrowski discusses the religious content in the novel, and the religious readings of the story offered in such interpretations as George Pal's 1953 film version, and decides that, at least in Wells's story, religious belief is a mere soother for the traumatised narrator, and in fact, in the novel, 'Wells had pulled on a thread of thinking about contact with extraterrestrial life, thus beginning a discussion

that continues in both science and science fiction. And Wells did so in terms of Darwinian biology, speculating not only on exobiology, but on exopsychology, and on what we now call sociobiology' (238).

In 'The Tiniest Assassins', Mike Resnick ponders the harm humans are doing by sending equipment covered in microbes into space and onto neighbouring planets. For, while Resnick argues that Martians capable of an invasion of Earth would be clever enough to prepare against Earthly viruses, he suggests that the arrival of human rovers and other space vehicles on alien planets might result in the elimination of those planets' populations. It is, apparently, known that bacilli living on human spacecraft have left and returned to Earth unharmed, and thus their conquest of other planets becomes entirely plausible.

The essays by David Zindell, Ian Watson and Connie Willis really should not have been included in the volume, as they lower the tone of the book, offer no original insights and often contain unbelievable statements. In Zindell's 'Martian Compassion', Wells's story of the Martian invasion of Earth is considered as a psychic telling of a 'real' invasion on parallel planets in an alternative universe. Zindell fancies that the Martian invasion was a compassionate one, aimed at saving Earth from ecological disaster at the hands of humans, while also planning to farm humans for their own nourishment. While the hypothesis sounds fine for a science fiction story it is of no interest in this volume of otherwise critical essays appended to Wells's story. As with Zindell's essay, in 'Of Warfare and *The War of the Worlds*', Ian Watson acts as the 'recorder' for the channelled utterances of Wells. This essay is of no value in considering Wells's work, though I might point out Watson's howler: Wells allegedly refers, through him, to 'my younger French counterpart, Monsieur Jules Verne' (279). Were these utterances really Wells's, and even allowing for human frailty, one cannot believe he would have forgotten that Verne was thirty-eight years his senior! The volume closes with a piece of gibberish, "The Soul Selects Her Own Society": Invasion and Repulsion: A Chronological Reinterpretation of Two of Emily Dickinson's Poems: A Wellsian Perspective', by Connie Willis which wastes the reader's time by suggesting that Emily Dickinson was raised from the dead by Wells's Martian invasion, and wrote many more poems under the influence of the invasion, thereby contributing to the Martians' fleeing the Earth!

This volume will be a treat for *War of the Worlds* fans, though its uneven quality (and the presence of the final three reviewed essays) will disappoint most Wellsians. As it includes the story itself, it is a value-for-money purchase, especially as the essays by Zebrowski, Silverberg and a couple of others provide some interesting insights. The academic or student reader, however, will find little in these essays to assist them in their research.