

An aerial photograph of a landscape, possibly a valley or a field, with a large, dark, elongated object, possibly a piece of wreckage or a large aircraft, falling from the sky. The sky is blue with scattered white clouds. A smaller, dark aircraft is visible in the upper left portion of the sky.

H.G. WELLS

THE

WAR

IN THE

AIR

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Edited by Aaron Worth



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INTRODUCTION

BY AARON WORTH

H. G. Wells, it has been pointed out, loathed war but could not seem to stop fantasizing about it: war between nations, pan-ethnic superstates, even (and most famously) entire planets. The wars he imagined, moreover, were particularly terrible, being waged with futuristic, and fantastically destructive, technology: tank-like “land ironclads” mowing down soldiers with automatic rifles, souped-up Zeppelins (as you will read here) reducing Manhattan to cinders, and atomic bombs annihilating the great cities of Europe. The paradox, of course, is only an apparent one: Wells staged fantasy wars—usually on a global scale—in hopes of preventing a real one. The catastrophes he depicted in novels like *The War in the Air* (1908), *The World Set Free* (1914), and *The Shape of Things to Come* (1934) were, in other words, prophylactic as well as imaginary—dire warnings directed at a too-complacent world. For that world he had a simple enough message, which he was not shy about repeating *ad nauseam*, and at the top of his lungs, over a period of many years: The crooked timber of human nature, if it truly evolves at all, cannot hope to keep pace with the development of our technology; therefore, arming a world of mutually antagonistic nation-states with increasingly devastating weaponry is a sure recipe for Armageddon. The only lasting solution, Wells insisted, lay in the creation of a single, unified World State, organized along (as he invariably put it) “rational” and “scientific” lines. The world, however, did not seem to be listening. Wells came to see himself as a modern-day Cassandra—a

conviction which the two World Wars he lived through, as well as a more or less general indifference to his schemes, did nothing to weaken. (In a preface to the 1941 edition of *The War in the Air* he proposed for himself the epitaph: “I told you so. You *damned* fools”).

There were, indeed, two sides to Wells—the Storyteller and the Prophet—and their coexistence had an uneasy, Jekyll-and-Hyde quality to it. During the final years of Queen Victoria’s reign, when Wells launched his writing career, the Storyteller had been firmly in the driver’s seat. In one miraculous decade of creative activity—less, in fact—Wells had given the world a string of iconic, and perennially popular, tales, one after another. *The Time Machine*, *The Invisible Man*, *The War of the Worlds*, *The Island of Doctor Moreau*, *The First Men in the Moon*, as well as short stories like “The Sea Raiders,” “The Crystal Egg,” and “The Stolen Bacillus”—these works need no critical intervention, no special pleading, to be enjoyed today. With the dawning of the twentieth century, however, Wells the Prophet began to get the upper hand—a development which many consider to have marred his later scientific romances in particular. These included *The War in the Air*, whose scenes of airborne action and combat are ballasted, so to speak, with heavy dollops of social and political commentary. And it is certainly true that the novel, popular in its day, has since fallen almost into obscurity. But this is a wholly undeserved fate, for Wells’s fantasia of aerial invasion, global devastation, and civilizational rebirth is both enjoyable as a science-fiction story in its own right and fascinating as a cultural document of the years immediately preceding the First World War.

Wells was not, to be sure, the first to imagine war in the air. As soon as people invented ways to travel above the earth, they fantasized about fighting there. It all began in November 1783, when the Montgolfier brothers sent a man soaring, untethered, over Paris in a hot-air balloon; ten days later, a hydrogen-filled balloon carried inventor Jacques Charles aloft. One eager spectator present at these pioneering flights

was a 77-year old Benjamin Franklin, who wondered afterwards how any nation could hope to defend against attack from above. Soon others were asking the same thing, particularly when, a few years later, the land of the Montgolfière and the Charlière forged itself into a potent military power that menaced all Europe. According to science fiction historian I. F. Clarke, the specter of invasion by France, combined with technological developments including the birth of flight, helped give birth to a new literary subgenre, the “tale of imaginary warfare” (7). Writers and engravers in both England and France depicted aerial invasions of Albion that seemed simultaneously fantastical and frighteningly possible. Then, half a century after the imperial ambitions of Napoleonic France were finally crushed, a new threat from the Continent—the emergence of a powerful, unified Germany which had decisively defeated a French nation ruled by Napoleon’s nephew—prompted an explosion of future-war fiction, in Britain and beyond. Sir George Tomkyns Chesney got things started, in dramatic fashion, with his 1871 *Battle of Dorking*, which depicted a successful invasion of England, in the very near future, by (thinly disguised) Prussian forces. (Wells would later employ tropes, already in evidence here, of superior technological acumen, and preternatural organizational ability, on the part of the German people.) Later future-war fiction often brought the battle to the skies. Perhaps the most prominent of these tales of aerial war were the fin-de-siècle novels of George Griffith (Wells’s once hugely popular, but now forgotten, rival): *The Angel of the Revolution* (1893), *Olga Romanoff or, The Syren of the Skies* (1894), and *The Outlaws of the Air* (1895). Here Griffith’s many readers encountered, among other technological marvels, Russian war-dirigibles pitted against Jules-Vernian air-ships in a struggle for world domination.

The War in the Air was not, then, written in a vacuum. Wells did not invent a new genre; he consciously adapted an existing literary mode to his own purposes (there is even a reference to Griffin’s *Outlaws of the Air* early in the novel). Of course, as I have suggested above, Wells

during this period was sometimes at cross-purposes even with himself. Yet in this case the tension between the Storyteller and the Prophet is for the most part a productive one. It is, first of all, a true tension—a struggle (if that is the right way to think of it) between evenly matched forces. The novel is not, in other words, merely a sermon posing, unconvincingly, as entertainment. Wells has an engaging, at times enthralling, story to tell, about Bert Smallways, a somewhat fatuous Cockney who is whisked away in a runaway balloon, then finds himself an unwilling passenger in a German airship on its way to conquer the United States. He becomes a (bird's-) eyewitness to carnage on sea and land, goes on to kill the haughty, visionary prince who had started the war, and eventually returns, a changed man, to an equally changed London, where he marries his sweetheart.

What this summary omits, however, is the somewhat disconcerting fact, not immediately apparent to the reader, that there is a larger frame narrative operating in the novel, with Bert's story told by an unnamed chronicler in the distant future—a citizen of Wells's utopian World State. The narrative perspective accordingly shuttles, at times rather vertiginously, between (on the one hand) the concrete, lovingly realized, human-scale world of Bert and his misadventures and (on the other) a loftier, more abstract discursive realm, thick with political and philosophical commentary, mingled with stretches of bare summary—a movement mirrored by Bert's own repeated forays from the earth to the sky and back again. Sometimes this shuttling undercuts (perhaps it is better to say “complicates”) the novel's effectiveness *qua* story, as when Bert races, like a bicycle-riding Paul Revere, to deliver into the hands of the American President the plans which may be able to save his nation from “Asiatic” conquest. At precisely this moment the chronicler from Utopia cuts in with a fresh wave of commentary, including the news that all victories in the war in the air proved Pyrrhic in the end—throwing cold water on the dramatic action, as though chiding the reader for getting caught up in it in the first place. If however Wells

INTRODUCTION

the Prophet fails to make Utopia seem real (let alone appealing), he portrays Apocalypse powerfully, as in this memorable account of a modernity that has been medievalized in the blink of an eye:

And as the exhaustion of the mechanical resources of civilization clears the heavens of air-ships at last altogether, Anarchy, Famine and Pestilence are discovered triumphant below. The great nations and empires have become but names in the mouths of men. Everywhere there are ruins and unburied men, and shrunken, yellow-faced survivors, in a mortal apathy. Here there are robbers, here vigilance committees, and here guerilla bands ruling patches of exhausted territory, strange federations and brotherhoods form and dissolve, and religious fanaticisms begotten of despair gleam in famine-bright eyes. It is a universal dissolution....In five short years the world and the scope of human life have undergone a retrogressive change as great as that between the age of the Antonines and the Europe of the ninth century....

As I have already indicated, *The War in the Air* never attained the same iconic status in popular culture as Wells's late-Victorian scientific romances. It spawned no Orson Welles radio dramas, no Hollywood movies starring Claude Rains, Bela Lugosi, Burt Lancaster, or Tom Cruise. And indeed, with the outbreak of a (real) world war the novel, and the future-war tale more generally, went into eclipse. The genre, however, never died out entirely. In the 1930s American pulp writer Robert Sidney Bowen, with his future air-war series *Dusty Ayres and his Battle Birds*, anticipated the second World War in much the same way as Wells had the first. Echoes of the genre can be found, too, in such later science fiction as Michael Moorcock's "Nomad of the Time Streams" novels of the 1970s and 1980s. Then, at the turn of the millennium, a more overt nod to Wells appeared in Alan Moore's celebrated graphic novel *The League of Extraordinary Gentlemen*, a pastiche featuring

characters from nineteenth- and early twentieth-century popular fiction (including Wells's Invisible Man, as well as his Martians). Moore moves Wells's war in the air to the skies above London itself—and back in time slightly, to the end of the previous century—while substituting new adversaries: Sherlock Holmes's nemesis Dr. Moriarty and Sax Rohmer's fiendish arch-villain Dr. Fu-Manchu (an even more lurid embodiment of the “Yellow Peril” mentioned by Bert Smallways). And today, the growing popularity of “steampunk”—as genre, subculture, and aesthetic—opens the door for new creative engagements with Wells's counterfactual world of Zeppelin fleets and goggle-wearing Edwardians.

But this 1908 novel resonates in the twenty-first century in deeper, and perhaps darker, ways as well. Several commentators have noted how its imagined destruction of Manhattan from above seems to anticipate the 2001 attacks on the World Trade Center. In other respects, too, Wells's depiction of future warfare speaks to our own historical moment as much as it does to the Great War he then saw on the horizon: in drone warfare, for example, one sees perhaps the apotheosis of the model of “detached” war which Steven Mollmann identifies in the novel (a bomber in an airship sees the people on the ground as ants; a drone operator, however, does not even have to be in the same hemisphere as the target). And politically speaking, such core Wellsian themes as the fate of nationalism, and the future of borders and boundaries, in an increasingly globalized world may never have been more relevant. Perhaps, more than a century after its initial appearance, *The War in the Air's* time has come. Again.

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PREFACE TO REPRINT EDITION

THE reader should grasp clearly the date at which this book was written. It was done in 1907: it appeared in various magazines as a serial in 1908, and it was published in the fall of that year. At that time the aeroplane was, for most people, merely a rumour and the “Sausage” held the air. The contemporary reader has all the advantage of ten years’ experience since this story was imagined. He can correct his author at a dozen points and estimate the value of these warnings by the standard of a decade of realities. The book is weak on anti-aircraft guns, for example, and still more negligent of submarines. Much, no doubt, will strike the reader as quaint and limited but upon much, the writer may not unreasonably plume himself. The interpretation of the German spirit must have read as a caricature in 1908. Was it a caricature? Prince Karl seemed a fantasy then. Reality has since copied Prince Karl with an astonishing faithfulness. Is it too much to hope that some democratic “Bert” may not ultimately get even with his Highness? Our author tells us in this book, as he has told us in others, more especially in *The World Set Free*, and as he has been telling us this year in his *War and the Future*, that if mankind goes on with war, the smash-up of civilization is inevitable. It is chaos or the United States of the World for mankind. There is no other choice. Ten years have but added an enormous conviction to the message of this book. It remains essentially right, a pamphlet story—in support of the League to Enforce Peace.



CHAPTER I

OF PROGRESS AND THE SMALLWAYS FAMILY

§1

“This here Progress,” said Mr. Tom Smallways, “it keeps on.”

“You’d hardly think it *could* keep on,” said Mr. Tom Smallways.

It was long before the War in the Air began that Mr. Smallways made this remark. He was sitting on the fence at the end of his garden and surveying the great Bun Hill gasworks with an eye that neither praised nor blamed. Above the clustering gasometers three unfamiliar shapes appeared, thin, wallowing bladders that flapped and rolled about, and grew bigger and bigger and rounder and rounder—balloons in course of inflation for the South of England Aero Club’s Saturday-afternoon ascent.

“They goes up every Saturday,” said his neighbour, Mr. Stringer, the milkman. “It’s only yestiday, so to speak, when all London turned out to see a balloon go over, and now every little place in the country has its weekly outings—uppings, rather. It’s been the salvation of them gas companies.”

“Larst Satiday I got three barrer-loads of gravel off my petaters,” said Mr. Tom Smallways. “Three barrer-loads! What they dropped as ballase. Some of the plants was broke, and some was buried.”

“Ladies, they say, goes up!”

“I suppose we got to call ‘em ladies,” said Mr. Tom Smallways.

“Still, it ain’t hardly my idea of a lady—flying about in the air, and throwing gravel at people. It ain’t what I been accustomed to consider ladylike, whether or no.”

Mr. Stringer nodded his head approvingly, and for a time they

continued to regard the swelling bulks with expressions that had changed from indifference to disapproval.

Mr. Tom Smallways was a green-grocer by trade and a gardener by disposition; his little wife Jessica saw to the shop, and Heaven had planned him for a peaceful world. Unfortunately Heaven had not planned a peaceful world for him. He lived in a world of obstinate and incessant change, and in parts where its operations were unsparingly conspicuous. Vicissitude was in the very soil he tilled; even his garden was upon a yearly tenancy, and overshadowed by a huge board that proclaimed it not so much a garden as an eligible building site. He was horticulture under notice to quit, the last patch of country in a district flooded by new and urban things. He did his best to console himself, to imagine matters near the turn of the tide.

“You’d hardly think it could keep on,” he said.

Mr. Smallways’ aged father could remember Bun Hill as an idyllic Kentish village. He had driven Sir Peter Bone until he was fifty, and then he took to drink a little and driving the station bus, which lasted him until he was seventy-eight. Then he retired. He sat by the fireside, a shrivelled, very, very old coachman, full charged with reminiscences, and ready for any careless stranger. He could tell you of the vanished estate of Sir Peter Bone, long since cut up for building, and how that magnate ruled the countryside when it was countryside, of shooting and hunting and of coaches along the high road, of how “where the gasworks is” was a cricket field, and of the coming of the Crystal Palace. The Crystal Palace was six miles away from Bun Hill, a great façade that glittered in the morning, and was a clear blue outline against the sky in the afternoon, and at night, a source of gratuitous fireworks for all the population of Bun Hill. And then had come the railway, and then villas and villas, and then the gasworks and the waterworks and a great, ugly sea of workmen’s houses, and then drainage, and the water vanished out of the Otterbourne and left it a dreadful ditch, and then a second railway station, Bun Hill South, and more houses and more,

more shops, more competition, plate-glass shops, a board school, rates, omnibuses, tramcars—going right away into London itself—bicycles, motor-cars and then more motor-cars, a Carnegie library.

“You’d hardly think it could keep on,” said Mr. Tom Smallways, growing up among these marvels.

But it kept on. Even from the first the greengrocer’s shop which he had set up in one of the smallest of the old surviving village houses in the tail of the High Street had a submerged air, an air of hiding from something that was looking for it. When they had made up the pavement of the High Street, they levelled that up so that one had to go down three steps into the shop. Tom did his best to sell only his own excellent but limited range of produce; but Progress came shoving things into his window, French artichokes and aubergines, foreign apples—apples from the State of New York, apples from California, apples from Canada, apples from New Zealand, “pretty lookin’ fruit, but not what I should call English apples,” said Tom—bananas, unfamiliar nuts, grapefruits, mangoes.

The motor-cars that went by northward and southward grew more and more powerful and efficient, whizzed faster and smelt worse; there appeared great clangorous petrol trolleys delivering coal and parcels in the place of vanishing horse-vans; motor-omnibuses ousted the horse-omnibuses, even the Kentish strawberries going Londonward in the night took to machinery and clattered instead of creaking, and became affected in flavour by progress and petrol.

And then young Bert Smallways got a motor-bicycle. . . .

[End of Sample Material]

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