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## The War of the Worlds, Wells, and the Fallacy of Empire

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## Chapter 4

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### *THE WAR OF THE WORLDS,* WELLS, AND THE FALLACY OF EMPIRE

*JOHN C. HAWLEY*

In his summary of the contemporary reviews of *The War of the Worlds* (1898), William J. Scheick notes that their extensive number suggests that readers now recognized that Wells was an emerging writer whom they could not ignore. "There were, again," Scheick notes, "reservations about slipshod style, hasty plotting, vulgar content and cheap effects; but these doubts were overrun by the general verdict that this romance was one of the most ingenious stories of the year and the best work to date of an author who was one of the most original of the younger English novelists" (Scheick 5). Earlier reviewers had angered Wells by comparing him to Jules Verne and to Rudyard Kipling, implying that he was something of a disciple to the two writers. In this latest novel he had again moved beyond Verne in his use of science; as we shall see, and as was missed by many of the contemporary reviewers, he had also moved far beyond Kipling in his implied critique of British colonial policies.

One of the first American reviews characterized *The War of the Worlds* as "an Associated Press dispatch, describing a universal nightmare" (Anon. [1] *Critic* 282). Just how universal that nightmare may have been in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries is something worth considering. In his own favorable review of the novel in the British *Spectator* in January of 1889, John St. Loe Strachey notes that Wells is a better writer than Edgar Allan Poe mostly because "in Poe there is always a stifling hothouse feeling which is absent from Mr. Wells's work. Even when Mr. Wells is most awful and most eccentric, there is something human about his characters" (168). And yet the reviewer anticipates a possible exception in this novel, and one that he feels some readers may find objectionable. "Many readers," he writes, "will be annoyed with Mr. Wells for not having made his Martians rather more human, and so more able to receive our sympathy of comprehension, if not of approbation." And yet, he notes

in Wells's favor, "a little reflection will, we think, show that this [desired demonstration of empathy] was impossible. This is [after all] the age of scientific speculation, and scientific speculation, rightly or wrongly, has declared that if there are living and sentient creatures on Mars they will be very different from men" (168). Thus, St. Loe Strachey excuses Wells's portrayal of the Martians as individuals who need not be dealt with as one might deal with another human. The significance of this ploy will be seen in what follows.

At a time when England was fearing an invasion from Germany, Wells's *The War of the Worlds* caught a paranoid national spirit. Reviewers such as St. Loe Strachey reveal a strikingly jingoistic agenda. In his discussion of the novel he sets out a very instructive allegory that is an only slightly camouflaged rendering of the "white man's burden." "Mr. Wells's main design," he writes,

is most original. As a rule, those who pass beyond the poles and deal with non-terrestrial matters take their readers to the planets or to the moon. Mr. Wells does not "err so greatly" in the art of securing the sympathy of his readers. He brings the awful creatures of another sphere to Woking Junction, and places them, with all their abhorred dexterity, in the most homely and familiar surroundings. A Martian dropped in the centre of Africa would be comparatively endurable. One feels, with the grave-digger in *Hamlet*, that they are all mad and bad and awful there, or, if not, it is no great matter. When the Martians come flying through the vast and dreadful expanses of interplanetary space hid in the fiery womb of their infernal cylinders, and land on a peaceful Surry [*sic*] common, we come to close quarters at once with the full horror of the earth's invasion. Those who know the valleys of the Wey and the Thames, and to whom Shepperton and Laleham are familiar places, will follow the advance of the Martians upon London with breathless interest. The vividness of the local touches, and the accuracy of the geographical details, enormously enhance the horror of the picture. When everything else is so true and exact, the mind finds it difficult to be always rebelling against the impossible Martians. (168)

One wonders for how many of his readers this reviewer was speaking when he implied that Martians wouldn't be out of place in Africa and, perhaps, equated them by extension to current inhabitants of all other unfamiliar parts of the British empire—those "awful creatures of another sphere. . . . very different from men." The implications of his dismissal of those "mad and bad and awful" inhabitants, who can hardly be seen as human in his eyes, would seem to be that one would have every right to deal with them as one might deal with these bloodsucking Martians. And with the Empire's increasing reliance on the cheap labor available abroad, the further revulsion the reviewer feels for the Martians' "abhorred dexterity" suggests the enduring upper-class confusion of hard work with inferior brute mentality, the Eloi/Morlock split that Wells had caricatured three years before. As Hugh Ridley has noted of the novels written by British settlers in the colonies, "many critics have remarked on the way in which

colonial stereotypes of the 'Native' resembled the pictures of the working-classes current in Europe at that time. The same childish, impulsive emotional character was invariably ascribed to both groups, and the same prejudices about their morals, their appetites, and their smell" (Ridley 139). Now, while it is true that these latter attributes can be applied to the invading Martians, these unwelcome visitors seem hardly to be childish in any recognizable sense. It is here that Wells undermines the typical stereotype of both the working-class and the indigenous "native" by, as we shall see, broadening the definition of "sentient creature," extending the metaphor and its implications to include more than his readers may have easily accepted, and implying a common indifferent or cruel parent.

In another review of the novel, in more guarded yet clearly allegorical terms, R.A. Gregory, described as "the greatest scientific journalist of his day" by the *Dictionary of National Biography*, concedes that "outside fiction, such an event as an alien invasion is hardly worth consideration" (339). But he goes on to cite where fiction in the past has successfully predicted scientific finds. Recent scientific writing had set the stage for a certain plausibility for Wells's story. One reviewer notes that Antoniadi, for example, had written that the canals on Mars's surface were "the work of rational beings immeasurably superior to man, and capable of dealing with thousands and thousands of square miles of grey and yellow material with more ease than we can cultivate or destroy vegetation in a garden one acre in extent" (Anon. [2] *Academy* 121). Expanding upon such observations, the same reviewer concedes that "naturally, the view that beings immeasurably superior to man exist upon Mars is repugnant," but that "Mr. Wells's idea of the invasion of the earth by emigrants of a race possessing more effective fighting machinery than we have is . . . not at all impossible" (121). R. A. Gregory, previously cited, makes the chilling observation that "the immigrants are as much unlike men as it is possible to imagine" (339). Describing such invaders as "immigrants" is a ridiculous understatement, on one level, but almost code language for the implied metaphor of the novel: just who are these very non-British folks—those arriving by air and those arriving by boat and scaling the island's chalky cliffs—and taking up residence in Woking Junction, or Bradford?

Furthermore, while some reviewers must have found it reassuring to emphasize how "unlike men" these immigrants were showing themselves to be, Wells seems to have been of another opinion. His description of the Martians sounds remarkably like his earlier description of "evolved" human beings, as he obliquely reminds the reader in the second chapter of Book Two of this novel:

It is worthy of remark that a certain speculative writer of quasi-scientific repute, writing long before the Martian invasion, did forecast for man a final structure not unlike the actual Martian condition. His prophecy, I remember, appeared in November or December, 1893, in a long-defunct publication, the *Pall Mall Budget* [a

weekly, composed of reprints from the *Pall Mall Gazette*], and I recall a caricature of it in a pre-Martian periodical called *Punch*. He pointed out—writing in a foolish, facetious tone—that the perfection of mechanical appliances must ultimately supersede limbs, the perfection of chemical devices, digestion; that such organs as hair, external nose, teeth, ears, and chin were no longer essential parts of the human being, and that the tendency of natural selection would lie in the direction of their steady diminution through the coming ages. The brain alone remained a cardinal necessity. Only one other part of the body had a strong case for survival, and that was the hand, “teacher and agent of the brain.” While the rest of the body dwindled, the hands would grow larger. (Hughes and Geduld 151)

This devolution of humanity was a topic dear to Wells’s heart, first dealt with at any length in 1885 in an address before the Science Debating Society, entitled “The Past and Future of the Human Race.” By describing these “immigrants” in much the same way as he had described humanity in the year 1 million, Wells seems to be suggesting, firstly, that they are not really completely different from humanity; secondly, that their actions may not be especially appalling by human standards; and thirdly, that their fate may not be far from our own, as well.

But what about the enemy within—the invisible microbes who ultimately defeat the Martians who, otherwise, would surely have conquered humanity? Again, the reviewer for the *Academy* looks to the days’ headlines for an analogous happenstance to demonstrate the validity of Wells’s science: “Englishmen,” he wrote, “who migrate to the West Coast of Africa, or the strip of forest land in India known as the Terai, succumb to malarial disease, and the Pacific Islander who comes to reside in London or another large British city, almost certainly perishes from tuberculosis” (122). The *Spectator*’s St. Loe Strachey could rejoice that these invading Martians would be brought low by, of all things, the tiny microbe. “They died in the end,” he writes, “because they were not, like men, the descendants of those who have survived after millions of years of struggle with the bacteria that swarm in air, earth, and water” (169). These reviewers are struggling to avoid equating the invading Martians with imperialistic Britons. By a stretch of the imagination we are meant to equate the Martians with the colonials in St. Loe Strachey’s mind, and in this context his survival-of-the-fittest mentality seems to suggest a political and social agenda. “Invaders” of Britain will surely fall away, whereas the brave and civilizing Britons who dominate the rest of the world do so *because they can*; it’s in the blood, so to speak, and has been given nature’s indisputable seal of approval.

But even without the postcolonial reading of St. Loe Strachey’s apparent metaphor, one can still note his anthropomorphic pride in a humanity that has battled it out with bugs over the years and, by all that’s holy, has beaten them back. The ominous counterargument of *The Hellstrom Chronicle*, in which humanity’s slender chances to survive the realm of insects is mathematically detailed, was still years in the future, and a Dar-

winian enthusiast might reasonably be forgiven for sitting on his laurels and reaching for the bug spray. An American reviewer at the time, for example, called the bacteria "our invisible allies" (Anon. [1] *Critic* 282). Yet Wells does not share this complacency about the position of humanity at the top of the food chain. He does, after all, begin the book with a quote from Kepler: "But who shall dwell in these worlds, if they be inhabited? Are we or they Lords of the World? And how are all things made for man?" As "dextrous" as the Martians may have been, their bodies had withered away. All brain, relying on superior mechanical genius to carry the day, how different were they from the industrial revolutionaries throughout England? And how permanent a seat did Wells's countrymen likely have in the dog-eat-dog world if they, too, thought to rely so heavily on their trains, steam engines, and other machines, their rifles that so changed the odds when they themselves invaded countries where they were so greatly outnumbered—not only by the native population, but by those invisible allies, the microbes? What if the *brown-skinned* microbes turned on them, as, in the British view, they had already brutally done at Cawnpore in 1857?

The moral fiber of England seemed to be fraying at a time when the hypocrisy that Samuel Butler was about to scathingly reveal in *The Way of All Flesh* (begun in 1872 and published in 1903) was braying loudly in chauvinistic journals. The threats to Britain's self-importance were manifest throughout society, and in *The War of the Worlds* Wells partially relativized his compatriots' attempts to bolster their flagging empire. As something of a culmination of Victorian tensions over Darwinian theories, the novel situates the human defenders in a larger world of *cosmic* insignificance. As the *Academy* reviewer admitted, "our smallness . . . in the universe receives its illustration" (121). Suggesting that *any* imperial thrust (human or Martian or microbial) is ultimately impotent, Wells is putting us all in the same boat—a boat that is going nowhere fast. The conquerors and the conquered are just too similar: not alien *enough* to offer an "alternate universe" of meaning beyond the familiar one in which phylogeny recapitulates ontogeny and offers no goal intelligible to humans.

David Y. Hughes and Harry M. Geduld note that "the Martians themselves, the most complex creations in the book, are already the victims of the forces they exert" (9). Those forces are what Wells, in "Bio-Optimism," calls "the Calvinism of science" (Wells, *Bio* 411), that is, "the inexorability of natural law, meaning the second law of thermodynamics and the degradation of solar energy" (Hughes and Geduld 9). The Martians find their planet cooling, and must preserve their civilization by conquering ours. Fiction at the end of the nineteenth century suggests that many late Victorians felt something similar: that their own civilization was moving in an entropic direction, and that outward expansion, which once seemed to offer a countervailing force to this inner collapse, was no longer sufficient.

Those British civil servants who were out in the colonies and shoring up the system sensed that something was amiss, though they rarely pushed through to the conclusion that Wells would have formed. As Hugh Ridley notes, settler fiction often touts a greater egalitarianism among the relatively classless society in the colonies and denigrates the elitism back in the mother country (while, at the same time, ignoring this "freer" society's dependence on its ongoing oppression of indigenous races [133]). "Like many colonial heroes," writes Ridley, "the European middle-classes had tasted the 'abandonment and realised worthlessness' of which Kipling spoke, recognising that they were as nothing in face of the catastrophes of war and the impersonal accounting of economic systems" (138).

As Hughes and Geduld note, Wells suggests three possible responses to the apocalyptic events of the novel: "the curate's Scriptural response, the narrator's moral and intellectual experimentalism, and the artilleryman's survivalist-authoritarian response . . . while overall *War of the Worlds* presents itself as an exploratory document whose readers must bridge into the world that is dawning after the invasion" (9). Blindly responding to an increasingly hopeless encounter with a collapsing Victorian system of meaning, the curate and his Scriptural fanaticism are ridiculed by Wells. This wild caricature would turn out to be the one character that would meet with various reviewers' criticism as being a bit overdone. The figure surely is drawn from the anger that a disillusioned Wells had shown in a letter ten years earlier, in which he had told a friend the following: "I know now that the whole Universe is a sham, a tin simulacrum of ideals, veneered deal pretending to mahogany. If I had not been an ass, I should have understood that, when the cardboard religious structure I constructed in my kid- and calthood caved in when I came to lean on it" (qtd. in Hughes and Geduld 10). The disillusionment and resulting anger were deep-seated and long-lasting, as demonstrated by the following incident recalled by the novelist's publisher, Fredric Warburg:

About 1943, Wells collected under the title *Crux Ansata* some indifferent and wildly partisan essays on the Catholic Church which he detested. When he offered them to me, I declined them with a polite note. Wells was furious, and rang up to call me every name under the sun. After listening to the torrent of abuse, and finding it impossible to get a word in edgeways, I hung up on him. That, I thought, will finish my career as Wells's publisher. But I was mistaken. Two days later, I received a charming letter from him, apologising for his bad manners and telling me to forget the whole incident. We did in fact continue to publish his more important books till the end of his life. It is, however, typical of Wells that he did not consign *Crux Ansata* to a bottom drawer, but persuaded Penguin Books to publish it. It appeared also in the U.S. (qtd. in Hammond 100)

Religion was not completely rotten, in Wells's eyes, but suspect as providing a self-centered escape from the facts of the human condition. In *The Open Conspiracy* (1928) he suggested that it might adequately pro-



vide an avenue "for service, for subordination, for permanent effect, for an escape from the distressful pettiness and mortality of the individual life" (24), but that it more surely led the majority to intolerance and ignorance.

The Artilleryman's solution meets with a similar, but somewhat less exposed, disgust. "In the days before the invasion," the narrator muses, "no one would have questioned my intellectual superiority to [the Artilleryman's]—I, a professed and recognised writer on philosophical themes, and he, a common soldier." And yet, in these latter days, what good was the supposed wisdom of philosophy? Nonetheless, the blunt doctrine of nature, red in tooth and claw, seems sadly naive in the soldier's gung ho gospel of survival: "The risk," he admits to the narrator, "is that we who keep wild will go savage—degenerate into a sort of big, savage rat." But that would be better, he implies, than the alternative of domestication by these invaders: "The tame ones will go like all tame beasts; in a few generations they'll be big, beautiful, rich-blooded, stupid—rubbish! . . . Those who stop obey orders." Meanwhile, the Artilleryman and those like him must live in a place apart, carefully husbanding their strength and gathering a rebellious remnant:

Able-bodied, clean-minded women we want also—mothers and teachers. No lackadaisical ladies—no blasted rolling eyes. We can't have any weak or silly. Life is real again, and the useless and cumbersome and mischievous have to die. They ought to die. They ought to be willing to die. It's a sort of disloyalty, after all, to live and taint the race. (Hughes and Geduld 175–76)

He sounds very much like a man who refuses to become the slave of any colonizing power with overwhelming firepower. His resistance has a brutish appeal to those who can assure themselves that his blunt eugenics will be kind to them.

But Wells stands back from the soldier's determination, and ponders what possible difference it could make in such a hopeless situation. He would gradually discern, as world wars and personal crises took their toll, that his own early utopian hopes were sadly similar to the bold dreams of this Artilleryman. The young writer had been one of the first to study biology under Huxley, which for Wells became "the central formative experience of his intellectual development" (Hughes and Geduld 12). Huxley, who died in 1895 (the year of the publication of *The Time Machine*) had become increasingly pessimistic in his closing years, writing in 1892: "I know no study which is so unutterably saddening as that of the evolution of humanity . . . [M]an . . . is a brute, only more intelligent than the other brutes" (qtd. in Hughes and Geduld 19). But Wells ultimately found Huxley too *lenient*, and found himself siding more with Darwin. For Wells, it was "the business of utopian planning to reduce that waste [of unbridled Darwinian elimination] by regulating the law of murder for progressive ends" (Stover 130). But both Huxley and Wells feared that all was for naught,



anyway: our fate would finally be much the same as that of the Martians. Any victory offered by the invisible allies in *The War of the Worlds* was not only pyrrhic, but also temporary.

Humanity's comfortable assurance of its own preeminence in nature is put to the test in this novel. Wells's narrator sets the tone in the book's first few sentences:

as men busied themselves about their various concerns they were scrutinised and studied, perhaps almost as narrowly as a man with a microscope might scrutinise the transient creatures that swarm and multiply in a drop of water. With infinite complacency men went to and fro over this globe about their little affairs, serene in their assurance of their empire over matter. It is possible that the infusoria under the microscope do the same. (Hughes and Geduld 51)

When their minds turned to the possibility of life on other planets, "at most, terrestrial men fancied there might be other men upon Mars, perhaps inferior to themselves and ready to welcome a missionary enterprise." The condescension of the British imperial mind is here held up to scorn before the imagined extraterrestrial empire writes back with horrifying results. In retrospect, however, the formidable invaders are judged to be powerful and heartless, totally devoid of ethics or compassion: the Martians have "minds that are to our minds as ours are to those of the beasts that perish, intellects vast and cool and unsympathetic" (51).

All seem to be on the attack—the British against their colonials, the Martians against the humans, the microbes against the aliens. What they share in common is a too narrow understanding of the cosmos, a too expansive sense of their relative significance in its impersonal operations. The depersonalizing of the victim that necessarily takes place as a part of the rationalization for conquest plays itself out in this novel by substituting the Martian invader for the British conqueror, the microbes for the invading Martians. Michael Harris suggests that Wells's readers would have found the assumptions that were under attack in the book very familiar. In discussing the portrayal of colonials by Wells's fellow novelists, Harris notes that

the British writers' attitude toward both their English and indigenous characters . . . indicates an overall similarity among them. There are three recurrent aspects of this body of fiction which reflect the British colonizers' attitude toward the colonized people and culture. First, the primary focus is almost always on the British rather than the indigenous characters. . . . Second, the indigenous characters are portrayed as isolated individuals with little or no humanizing connection to family or society. And third, the British writers, perhaps unconsciously, frequently use animalistic images in describing indigenous characters. (180)

If Wells's readers were to reverse their common perspective and ask how the British invader might appear to the Indians, Africans, and Caribbeans, how comfortable would it be to draw the comparison with the invading

## Martians?

The relativization of cultural superiority in *The War of the Worlds* is rooted in Wells's sense of alienation in a world that never seemed to be his home. In his *Experiment in Autobiography*, written when he was sixty-eight and suggesting the hopelessness he felt as an adolescent, Wells describes God as an unsympathetic agent not unlike the Martians:

One night [as a boy of eleven or twelve] I had a dream of Hell so preposterous that it blazed that undesirable resort out of my mind for ever. . . . There was Our Father in a particularly malignant phase, busy basting a poor broken sinner rotating slowly over a fire built under the wheel. I saw no Devil in the vision; my mind in its simplicity went straight to the responsible fountain head. . . . Never had I hated God so intensely. (45)

In this view God is the ultimate conqueror, the grand manipulator, inescapable and inscrutable. Despite the great successes of his life, and the many intriguing relations he had with women, Wells never managed to escape the early sense of entrapment by cosmic forces that were "busy basting a poor sinner." C. P. Snow reports that this sense of despair followed Wells through his life: "In 1938 Wells abruptly asked, one evening in Cambridge, 'Ever thought of suicide, Snow?', and then confessed that he had been considering suicide himself since he had reached the age of seventy (he was then seventy-two)" (Batchelor 155). This was one side to the dualism that John Batchelor observes in Wells's writing: "Pessimistic and optimistic ideas co-exist throughout: on the one hand is the belief that man is a degenerating species who invents gods to compensate himself for his own weaknesses and is doomed by the laws of entropy, and on the other hand is the hope that man can transform his future by the exercise of his will and the right understanding of his own history" (Batchelor 155).

Where the direction of this schizophrenic thinking was leading the age, couched, on one hand, in a fascination with science and with the world it was ushering in and, on the other hand, in a significant sense of impending violence, draws to a sharp point in the philosophy of Friedrich Nietzsche. In Nietzsche's nihilistic writings of the 1880s, the alterity that supported the rationalizing of empire becomes insupportable in the philosopher's view of the larger cosmic alienation of humanity. In describing this thinking, which bridged the nineteenth and twentieth centuries and still heavily influences philosophers as we cross into the twenty-first, Françoise Lionnet writes that "it is by rejecting the whole Western tradition of binary thinking, which contributes to the naturalization of such distinctions as male/female, master/slave, autonomous/dependent, writer/reader, that Nietzsche succeeds in reaffirming a principle of interconnectedness in which subjects and objects, self and other, are conditioned by their interactions in the world and thus become open to transformations of all sorts" (Lionnet 68). The implication seems to be that "empires" of the mind that insist on black and white borders must fall,

culturally imposed distinctions must be surmounted—by those who can—before the truly stark condition of all humanity may be squarely faced: *all* living things are quirks in the vast, cold emptiness of space. Our responsibilities are to all living things, here, and now.

But such honesty among the masses was not to be anticipated. Wells had good reason for despair, since “such a self [‘open to transformations’] often remains caught in an alienating polarization against the other or in a negative identification with that other, while it is struggling to *procreate* a third term” (Lionnet 68). Judging from his conversation with C. P. Snow, Wells never felt that he had succeeded in forging that new, non-binary being. Yet his struggle to do so legitimated a new science-based branch of literature that has blossomed and become in our own day one of the most compelling sites for the continuing battle against empires that resist imagination.

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