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Inventing Tomorrow: H. G. Wells and the Twentieth Century. Sarah Cole. New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 2020. Pp. 392. \$35.00 (cloth).

Reviewed by David Shackleton, Cardiff University

In Inventing Tomorrow, Sarah Cole undertakes the considerable challenge of rewriting the literary history of the twentieth century in England. H. G. Wells, she claims, has been maligned. Such a process began in Wells's day, with his tendency to portray himself as a journalist rather than an artist, and to display scant respect for his venerated peers. For example, he famously lampooned Henry James in his novel Boon (1915), causing an irreparable rift in their friendship; repaid Joseph Conrad's admiration by expressing impatience with literary impressionism; and frankly admitted to James Joyce that he considered Finnegans Wake (1939) to be a "dead end." Conversely, many of the writers who are now considered modernist defined their artistic practices against those of Wells. Most famously, Virginia Woolf aligned him with Arnold Bennett and John Galsworthy as "materialist" writers, who were being superseded by a new cohort of "moderns." F. R. Leavis and the New Critics made similar assessments, as they formed their influential academic conceptions of modernism. To add insult to injury, "metamodernist" novelists write back to a tradition that excludes Wells. Against the features that have come to define modernism and shape many of our literary tastes—the primacy of the interior life of the mind, indirection and elusiveness, the banishment of political discussion or definitive position

taking, the belief that the work of art is autonomous, and the eschewing of popular appeal—Wells does indeed fare badly (18).

Yet it is a great achievement of Inventing Tomorrow that it frees Wells from the weight of this collective judgement, and reappraises his writing outside the reductive portrayals that have been used to counter-define modernism. Wells, Cole argues, should be considered a “modernist antimodernist,” or better, should be included within a more capacious understanding of modernism (16). By doing so, she joins a broader trajectory in modernist studies, and particularly the “vertical” expansion of modernism associated with the new modernist studies, in which the sharp boundaries between high art and popular culture have been reconsidered. In rehabilitating Wells, Cole shows how he carved out a role for himself as a public commentator, and traces characteristic features of his style: his tendency to place himself in his writings; his unusual uses of figurative language; his development of a mode of fiction-as-argument that stretches his themes across multiple texts; his idiosyncratic use of specialized language; his tonal dialectic that shifts between violent destruction and optimism; and his powerful visual imagination, which links his works with literary impressionism and the aesthetics of film. What emerges is a picture of Wells as an activist writer, constantly developing new literary forms and genres to support his political projects. While this model of political activism may set him apart from other writers of his time, Cole contends that it deserves greater attention in our current political moment, and particularly in relation to “environmental crisis and precarity” (235).

Having explored how Wells developed a voice capable of engaging a wide readership, the second chapter of this study surveys his writings on war. Cole attends to his visions of worldwide destruction in works such as The War in the Air (1908); his belief that the noncombatant faces a challenge of the imagination; his emphasis on what is to come, partly inspired by the genre of next-war fiction which flourished since the 1871 defeat of France by Germany; and his development of a mode of writing that positions the civilian to take responsibility for peace, in pamphlets such as The War That Will End War (1914). She draws on Judith Butler's, Marianne Hirsch's, and Anna Tsing's theorizations of the ethical incitement of shared vulnerability to argue that his novel Mr. Britling Sees It Through (1916) and wartime polemics provide ways of transforming precariousness and threat into empowerment and alliance. Flagging how his ethics of imagining reorient us to the future allows Cole to reposition Wells in relation to what Paul Saint-Amour and Beryl Pong identify as a broader modernist concern with the anticipation of war, and particularly with the anticipation of "total war."¹ Yet Cole argues that Wells's orientation towards the future is more overt than many of his modernist peers, and that his attitudes extend beyond the dread of tense futurity. Reprising some of the themes of Cole's At the Violet Hour (2012), this chapter argues that Wells develops new literary forms to imagine the role of the civilian in

¹ See Paul Saint-Amour, *Tense Future: Modernism, Total War, Encyclopedic Form* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2015); and Beryl Pong, *British Literature and Culture in Second World Wartime: For the Duration* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020).

war, as both “the victim of history’s brutal onslaughts and the agent of its ultimate pacification” (107).

Expanding on the theme of anticipation, the next chapter is devoted to “time.” Complementing Charles Tung’s Modernism and Time Machines (2019), Cole puts Wells’s experiments with time into dialogue with those of his modernist contemporaries, highlighting his preoccupations with the future and with deep time. She tracks how his “discovery of the future,” as the title of one of his published lectures has it, registers across a wide range of genres, distinguishing his vocations as a planner and a seer (166). Again, she elucidates what she calls his “archaeological imagination,” demonstrating how he shares with many of his contemporaries an interest in “prehistory” and the remote past (154). Both concerns come together in The Outline of History (1920), which Cole argues is his “greatest work” (231). In her bravura reading, she notes that his totalizing approach to history may seem to put him at odds with his modernist contemporaries. Yet she argues that the way that particular scenes and actors cut against the coherence and order that is imposed as a pattern on history actually forms a point of comparison with a work such as Joyce’s Ulysses (1922), and its encyclopedic form. As she puts it, The Outline of History is Wells’s “most quintessential work because it expresses the grasp of totality but also the infinite ways such totality can and must be split, undone, dissolved, resisted” (231). Analysing his propensity to think on vast temporal and spatial scales, and at the level of the species rather than individuals, paves the way for a final chapter on “life.” Returning to familiar ground in Wells criticism—his formative encounter with biological and

evolutionary thought as a student of T. H. Huxley at the Normal School of Science—this chapter explores themes of evolution and waste.

Throughout, Cole does not shy away from the less palatable aspects of Wells's politics, such as his equivocal treatment of race, or his notorious statements on eugenics. Yet rather than using such statements as keys that can unlock his oeuvre, she provides nuanced and judicious analysis of his politics, and indicates how they find new relevance and urgency in the present. For example, she hints that his exploration of atomic energy in The World Set Free (1914) resonates with the concerns that animate the energy humanities, and that his experiments with time become especially pertinent as “the geological scales governing the earth come into vivid focus in our era of climate peril” (267, 9). Similarly, she shows how “[h]is concept of the world partakes of all of the major strands of global thinking occupying critics today,” including by being engaged with the “global” of global capitalism and its attendant inequities and imperial legacies, and a planetary scope and understanding founded on astronomy, geology, history, and ecology (305).

In The Time Machine (1895), the Traveller is disappointed not to find a cicerone who can explain the future world to him, in the manner of utopian fiction. Luckily, we have Cole to play this role for us, regarding Wells's writing. She advocates and implements a strategy of “read[ing] at large”—a strategy that includes reading across texts, resisting the habit of categorizing narrowly by genre, and reengaging the literary work in its dialogue with a reading public—to tackle his dauntingly voluminous output (45). She thereby

produces a valuable and comprehensive introduction to his work, showing how our interest should extend beyond a handful of early scientific romances, to encompass his essays, manifestos, textbooks, essay-novels, pamphlets, forecasts, histories, future-histories, utopias, and other works that resist such neat categorization. Replicating some of the most engaging aspects of his writing, including its enthusiasm, ambitiousness, and totalizing impulse, Inventing Tomorrow will serve as a touchstone for a future generation of Wells scholars. Overall, it succeeds in its revisionist aims, showing how reading Wells against more celebrated modernist writers can produce a better understanding of both, and a richer picture of the history and politics of literature in twentieth-century England.