

新刊紹介

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**Linda Dryden, *Joseph Conrad and H. G. Wells:
The Fin-de-Siècle Literary Scene***

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Linda Dryden's book takes as its opening theme, the cultural movement at the end of the nineteenth century and the beginning of the twentieth century: the *fin de siècle*. This was a time of transition. She marks out 1895 as a 'momentous year' (1) not least because T. H. Huxley, Louis Pasteur and Alexandre Dumas died and J. Edgar Hoover, Max Horkheimer and F. R. Leavis were born. Amongst all this, H. G. Wells and Joseph Conrad were busy writing and publishing. H. G. Wells was already established as the writer of *The Time Machine* and was a successful book reviewer. Joseph Conrad, however, just embarking on his writing career, was struggling. What is to follow is the account of their relationship; how they became acquainted, interacted and influenced each other. Literary history and literary biography are important here. In this book they are writers and much of their hopes, desires and personal opinions are projected through that medium. They define their work and their work defines them.

Though the *fin de siècle* influenced a range of cultural movements across Europe, the geographical area focused on here encompasses the counties of Kent and Sussex, just south of London. Apart from Wells and Conrad, Stephen Crane, Ford Madox Ford and Henry James lived nearby. This made for a lively literary scene. Writers could just drop in on each other, 'as if one had just come down from washing his hands in the bedroom' (5). They discussed literature and even collaborated in writing.

Conrad first became acquainted with Wells through the latter's review of *Almayer's Folly* and then *An Outcast of the Islands*. Wells saw promise in Conrad's work and though the reviews were published anonymously, Conrad wrote a thank you letter for the favourable comments. Their relationship developed; Wells advising Conrad on style and technique. In Linda Dryden's book, the early stages see Wells as the experienced writer and Conrad the novice. Conrad asks for Wells's opinion on his work, Wells gives it praising or criticizing. When criticizing, Conrad graciously accepts but 'is defiant in his comments to others' (14). Later, Conrad discovers he is corresponding with Wells and so they continue until 'Youth'. Wells suggests 'losing the final page or so of "Youth"' (18). However, Conrad continues the story 'for another four paragraphs' (17), suggesting his increased confidence in his writing.

Dryden compares *The War of the Worlds* and *Heart of Darkness*, particularly in the context of Martians. There is a suggestion that Wells's book influenced Conrad's, especially noted in Marlow's comments: 'I knew once a Scotch sailmaker who was certain, dead sure, there were people in Mars' (22). Dryden lists other possible points of interest and says 'Conrad viewed Wells with a mixture of awe and respect' (26) and 'Conrad was deeply impressed by Wells's narrative strategies and singleness of purpose.' She also comments: 'Wells was the critical reader that Conrad needed, fulsome in his praise when he felt the power of Conrad's vision, uncompromising in his criticism of stylistic excesses' (26). From this, we see how close they became. However, literary influence was not one-way. Wells's novel, *Tono-Bungay*, set in Africa is 'In fact [...] peppered with conscious, and maybe unconscious allusions to Conrad's works. Characters, themes, episodes and even some of the writing in the novel carry echoes, especially of *Heart of Darkness*' (77).

Conrad's independence from Wells's grew. A notable episode that Dryden describes in detail is Conrad's collaboration with Ford, particularly on the novel *Romance*. Generally, in Conradian studies, Ford

is seen as Conrad's literary friend but also his literary adversary, occasionally burnishing his own reputation subtly at his friend's expense. In this book, Ford is Conrad's comrade, planning the future of the 'New Form' (8) of literature that would later be modernism. Together, they are struggling writers, both of foreign origin hoping to be accepted by the literary establishment in Britain. Wells is still the experienced guide, though suspicious of their artistic, impressionistic writing style. When, though, Conrad and Ford decided to write together, they did so 'against all of his [Wells's] best advice' (43). Even Henry James objected: 'To me this is like a bad dream which one relates at breakfast!' (40). According to Dryden, Conrad and Ford, in writing *Romance*, produced 'a hybrid that ultimately satisfied neither their own ambitions [to write a novel in the style of *Treasure Island*] nor the reading public that they were trying to attract [to make money], and they alienated a large portion of the critical press' (61).

As has already been mentioned, Wells's novel, *Tono-Bungay*, is 'peppered with conscious, and maybe unconscious allusions to Conrad's works'. In Dryden's account of the Conrad/Wells's relationship, this, it seems, was the closest Wells came to accepting Conrad and Ford's principles of the 'New Form'. She makes the interesting observation that Wells, even though he was not attracted to modernism, connected with some of its themes of social uncertainty: 'Wells may not, ultimately, have been a modernist writer in the way that Conrad was, but some of his observations about the individual's sense of insignificance and isolation are very much influenced by the modernist perceptions of a fragmented and uncertain world that preoccupy Conrad' (91). This is in the context of Wells's 'Empire of the Ants', but a similar case can be made for *Tono-Bungay*. Dryden 'suggest[s] that Wells pays homage to Conrad in *Tono-Bungay* at the same time as he challenges Conrad's convictions about the value and purpose of literary art' (78).

After this almost meeting of minds, however, an irrevocable rift

developed over Wells's *Mankind in the Making*. This utopian vision of humankind, 'elicited from Conrad some very forthright criticisms' (97). Dryden states, 'Wells's prescription for achieving a utopian future is thus, for Conrad, naïve, overly optimistic, and lacking a realistic understanding of the limitations of humanity within a universe that is indifferent to its fate' (99). According to Dryden, 'Conrad emphasizes the necessity of taking into account the human dimensions to future change; and when Conrad talks about humanity, he is thinking of a humanity that is flawed' (99). However, 'As Wells's thought tries to be neat and free from conflict, it falls inevitably into a totalitarian scheme; it sidesteps concrete particulars and settles easily and disastrously into complacent abstraction (Huntington 118-19)' (99). Dryden redresses the extent of Wells's utopian vision of humanity with reference to Conrad's 'Autocracy and War' and Allan Simmons on the 'maturity of Conrad's political vision' (110) expressed in his novels, *Nostramo*, *The Secret Agent* and *Under Western Eyes*. In 'Autocracy and War', Conrad wrote on the state of Russia, but extended this to the political condition of Europe: 'Conrad's vision of a Europe in crisis, lurching inexorably towards a major conflict is more prescient than Wells's vision of the triumph of science' (106). However, Conrad, according to Najder, remained optimistic about the good intentions of humanity. As Conrad states in the essay 'Books': 'To be hopeful in an artistic sense it is not necessary to think that the world is good. It is enough to believe that there is no impossibility of it being made so' – quoted from Najder's 'Conrad's European Vision' 54-55 (108).

Conrad also remained optimistic about his friendship with Wells. Dryden documents his dedication of *The Secret Agent*, which Karl defines as 'an attempt on Conrad's part to recapture their best days' (163). After their disagreement over *Mankind in the Making*, their literary expectations diverged markedly. In a letter to Wells, Conrad employs a simple line drawing to emphasize the strength of their relationship, explaining, 'that their "differences are fundamental but the divergence is

not great” (119). Dryden writes, ‘his [Conrad’s] eagerness not to become estranged from Wells caused him to claim that the first graphic depicting their relationship as one of interwoven convergences and agreements was the nearest to the truth’. However, according to Dryden, ‘the second graphic showing a widening gulf was much nearer the mark’ (169).

Dryden then turns in chapter 6, ‘The Shape of War and of Things to Come’ to Wells’s book, *In the Days of the Comet*. In history, particularly mediaeval times, comets were taken as signs, portents, omens. Good or bad luck would follow the sighting of a comet. The book, *In the Days of the Comet*, presents a utopian vision of the future, in which ‘the past must be swept away’ (173), for what is to come. Conrad received a copy. Dryden speculates that he did not like the ideas there in, but so as not to appear impolite to Wells, delayed making any final, certain statement, saying ‘he [Conrad] confesses that his “thinking is at present in a confused state” over the book (*Collected Letters* 3: 356)’ (170) and ‘he is studiously circumspect’ (172). The figure of the comet can be considered a trope for a major social upheaval, or a dramatic change of leadership. Only such a happening would shake a country out of its old customs and launch a new age. Though *In the Days of the Comet* was published in 1906, Dryden connects its themes with World War I and Wells’s optimism for the age to come: ‘For Wells, the war, like his eponymous comet, was to guarantee future peace: of course, he could not have been more wrong’ (176). For Conrad, however, according to Najder, ‘Contrary to many contemporary writers, he neither idealized nor glorified the war’ (174). Dryden again refers to ‘Autocracy and War’ to illustrate the division of opinion on this point: ‘However, as we have seen, in ‘Autocracy and War’ Conrad had already predicted the catastrophe in Europe, and laid out his opinion of warmongers’ (175). Dryden concludes with: ‘Wells was to be bitterly disappointed, and Conrad was to be proven prophetic in his belief in the lessons of human history, and human imbecility’ (174).

In the section, ‘The shape of literature to come’, Dryden attempts a

reconciliation between Conrad and Wells and finalize some of the main themes of her book. She says that their relationship had begun on the basis of Wells's good opinion of Conrad's work and, 'largely brought to a close on the basis of Conrad's poor opinion of Wells's idealism and political didacticism' (188), that is Conrad's unfavourable opinion of Wells's *Mankind in the Making*. Placing their relationship in literary history, she points out, 'The paths that each chose to pursue defined key moments in the development of the literature in the twentieth century' (188).

Joseph Conrad and H. G. Wells: The Fin-de-Siècle Literary Scene appears to be an extended explanation of why students, in their under-graduate years, predominantly study modernist literature in British universities and not, say, Georgian literature. Certain texts from literary history have been salvaged for the appreciation of later generations. They maybe represent a defining moment in art, thought or social attitudes. They also denote what the present thinks about the past. Ideas of a utopian future may have been prevalent at the beginning of the twentieth century, but events, for example World War I, changed opinions radically. Largely, the inner world of the self became a subject more worthy of study, than the outer world of a so-called perfect society, excepting Aldous Huxley and George Orwell. This is, to an extent, reflected in what we study now. Literary trends change and that can be seen in this book. Also, universities, when creating syllabi, have to consider attracting young people, who now pay high tuition fees – in England and Wales, but not in Scotland, I believe – to study at their institutions. Universities operate in a market economy. Wells remains popular, mainly for his early work and they transfer very well to film – see Tom Cruise in *War of the Worlds*, directed by Steven Spielberg. This illustrates that some of his ideas still connect with audiences today.

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