
A MISFIT IN ALL TIMES: H. G. WELLS AND “THE LAST WAR”*

ALEXANDER M. NORDLUND

Department of History, University of Georgia
E-mail: anordlu4@uga.edu

The First World War is often alluded to as “the war to end all wars,” a phrase credited to H. G. Wells at the outbreak of the conflict. Rather than a self-proclaimed product of war enthusiasm in 1914, his declaration represented a consistent vision of warfare that Wells circulated in much of his work: that a major war would cause the collapse of the nation state and facilitate the rise of a utopian, technocratic world state. Although partly a cultural product of his own times, Wells mythologized himself as a misfit in all times: a sociopolitical critic antithetical to the madness of his own society. This study asserts that rather than an attempt at prophecy, it is this misfit image that informed his declaration in 1914 and societal responses to it.

“I TOLD YOU SO”: INTRODUCTION

In a preface to the 1941 edition of *The War in the Air* (first edition 1908), H. G. Wells declared that he wished his epitaph to read, “I told you so. You *damned* fools.” Written in the aftermath of the Battle of Britain, the first part of this epitaph alludes to the author’s conscious use of prophecy throughout his work, while the second describes how he mythologized himself as an enlightened misfit in a world gone mad. At the outbreak of the First World War, Wells seems to have gone mad himself when he wrote *The War That Will End War* (1914), in which he enthusiastically supported what he labeled the “last war” in spite of his “declared horror of war.”¹ Looking back at his declaration twenty years later in *Experiment in Autobiography* (1934), Wells told his readers that “for a time [in 1914]—in spite of my intellectual previsions—the world disaster, now that it had come, so

* I would like to thank Andrea Lynn for suggesting source material on H. G. Wells that helped begin this project; Professor Jane Garnett at Wadham College, University of Oxford; and Professors Kathleen Clark, John Morrow, and James McClung at the University of Georgia. I would also like to acknowledge my fellow graduate students at the University of Georgia who provided invaluable feedback in the early stages of this project, particularly Nicole Gallucci, Kate Dahlstrand, Liz Busquets, Monica Blair, Michele Johnson, Aleck Stephens, and Kiersten Rom.

¹ H. G. Wells, *The War That Will End War* (London, 1914), 12, 19.

overwhelmed my mind that I was obliged to thrust this false interpretation upon it.”² On the surface, this changing attitude shows a prophet rationalizing how his predictions were falsified by events. In reality, it reveals a public intellectual using his reputation as a prophet to mask his own failings as a sociopolitical activist campaigning tirelessly for the creation of a “Wellsian” world state. Rather than being a self-proclaimed departure from the established ideas of his literary career, *The War That Will End War* was one of many works before, during, and after 1914 that circulated Wells’s contempt for his own time and ambition to reshape society and the political order into his imagined world state.

In the now classic *Great War and Modern Memory*, literary critic Paul Fussell argues that “there seems to be one dominating form of modern understanding; that it is essentially ironic; and that it originates in the application of mind and memory to the events of the Great War.”³ In cultural memory, the phrase “the war to end all wars” has implicitly become a rhetorical device for understanding the perceived irony of the First World War: an idealistic, naive generation went to war for utopian aspirations, only to discover the inherent horror and futility of war.⁴ Such contemporary cultural meaning, for better or worse, has converged with the history of British society during the First World War, with many histories of the war alluding to it in passing as “the war to end all wars” without entirely considering the phrase’s origins, meaning, or historical validity. Historiography of the conflict has stressed the importance of H. G. Wells as a “prophet” who came the closest to imagining the future of warfare before 1914, only to be ignored by his “backward” contemporaries. His works, notably the fictional works *The War of the Worlds* (1898), “The Land Ironclads” (1903), *The War in the Air* (1908), *The World Set Free* (1914), and the nonfictional *Anticipations* (1901), have received praise from historians and literary scholars for their insight into how technological change and industrial innovation had transformed warfare in terms of its destructive capabilities.⁵ Such an approach to prophecy is open to challenge

² H. G. Wells, *Experiment in Autobiography: Discoveries and Conclusions of a Very Ordinary Brain (since 1866)*, vol. 1, (London, 1934), 668.

³ Paul Fussell, *The Great War and Modern Memory: Illustrated Edition* (New York, 2009; first published 1975), 41; for historical criticism of Fussell see Robin Prior and Trevor Wilson, “Paul Fussell at War,” *War in History*, 1/63 (1994), 63–80; and Leonard V. Smith, “Paul Fussell’s *The Great War and Modern Memory: Twenty-Five Years Later*,” *History and Theory*, 40/2 (2001), 241–60.

⁴ This narrative of the war has come under intense criticism from historians of the war, but it nevertheless remains strong within popular history and memory. See Brian Bond, *The Unquiet Western Front: Britain’s Role in Literature and History* (Cambridge, 2002); Dan Todman, *The Great War: Myth and Memory* (London, 2011).

⁵ See I. F. Clarke, *Voices Prophesying War: Future Wars, 1763–3749* (Oxford, 1992); Cecil D Eby, *The Road to Armageddon: The Martial Spirit in English Popular Literature, 1870–1914*

for its dependence on a teleology marking the First World War as a preconceived end point, with Wells and a few select “pacifist” writers, notably fellow Briton Norman Angell and the Polish economist Ivan Bloch, being labeled as the lone voices of sanity that understood the “truth” about modern warfare.⁶ For literary critics, notably Samuel Hynes, Wells appears as a semi-important figure amidst the collapse of Victorian cultural norms during the Edwardian period and the mythology of the First World War, notably the understanding of the conflict as a cultural watershed.⁷ Periodization, however, remains a shortcoming of this literary approach, as it relegates the First World War to an ahistorical phenomenon situated between two inherently “different” worlds, a myth whose origins can partly be found in Wells’s novel *Boon* (1915). Within such a framework, Wells’s enthusiastic support for war in 1914 is seen to be at odds with his self-proclaimed pacifism and much of his previous writing on warfare, thus reinforcing the worn-out “war-enthusiasm” thesis of the outbreak of the First World War.⁸ Additionally, under the assumption that the conflict had completely destroyed the prewar world, it indirectly imposes the notion that Wells and the rest of British society had inherently different intellectual perspectives from 1918 onward.⁹ While certainly not “fond” of war, Wells was by no means the “extreme Pacifist” he claimed to be, which is made clear in his writing before, during, and after the First World War.¹⁰ In many ways, the foundations of the Wellsian utopia can often be linked to the outbreak of an apocalyptic war, with either the intervention of enlightened

(Durham, 1987); Antulio J Echevarria II, *Imagining Future War: The West’s Technological Revolution and Visions of Wars to Come, 1880–1914* (Westport, 2007); Samuel Hynes, *The Edwardian Turn of Mind* (London, 1991), 43–5.

⁶ See Ivan S Bloch, *The Future of War in Its Technical, Economic, and Political Relations: Is War Now Impossible?*, trans. R. C. Long (New York, 1899); and Norman Angell, *The Great Illusion: A Study of the Relation of Military Power in Nations to Their Economic and Social Advantage* (London, 1910). It is perhaps important to note that, despite some shared areas of focus, the sociopolitical visions of Wells, Angell, and Bloch were profoundly distinct from each other.

⁷ Wells does not figure heavily in the work of Fussell, but he has received attention in other works. See Hynes, *Edwardian Turn of Mind*; Samuel Hynes, *A War Imagined: The First World War and English Culture* (London, 1992). For more recent literary criticism, see Randall Stevenson, *Literature and the Great War, 1914–1918* (Oxford, 2013).

⁸ See Hew Strachan, *The Outbreak of the First World War* (Oxford, 2004), 131–40; Michael Neiberg, *Dance of the Furies: Europe and the Outbreak of World War I* (Cambridge, MA, 2013); Adrian Gregory, *The Last Great War: British Society and the First World War* (Cambridge 2008), 9–39.

⁹ For historical criticism of this cultural watershed approach see Jay Winter, *Sites of Memory, Sites of Mourning: The Great War in European Cultural History* (Cambridge, 2010; first published 1995).

¹⁰ H. G. Wells, *Italy, France and Britain at War* (a.k.a. *War and the Future*) (New York, 1917), 5.

world leadership or war itself destroying the outdated sociopolitical order that Wells inhabited.

Throughout his career, Wells was far more than a self-proclaimed “prophet,” and readers did not fail to notice this. This is made quite obvious in *The War That Will End War*, which hailed him as the author of *Tono-Bungay* (1909), *The New Machiavelli* (1912), and *Marriage* (1913). Soon after his death in 1946, the *Manchester Guardian* declared that with *Tono-Bungay*, *Kipps* (1905), and *The History of Mr. Polly* (1910), Wells had inherited the “mantle of [Charles] Dickens.”¹¹ Rather than science-fictional prophesies, all of these works were sociopolitical critiques of late Victorian and Edwardian Britain dealing with class relations, capitalism, politics, sexual freedom, women’s suffrage, and gender equality. What is perhaps most striking is that his publishers decided that these works would resonate more with contemporary readers than would the science fiction he later became known for, which makes the focus of some historians on Wells’s success or failure at prophecy appear particularly problematic. When he did write in a prophetic voice, Wells did not do so in a disinterested way, but rather used prophecy at various times in his works to serve his primary motive: sociopolitical criticism and his campaign to establish a world state.

This study seeks to understand H. G. Wells not as a prophet per se, but rather as a sociopolitical critic of his own time, with “prophecy” being one of many literary devices he used to spread his ideas. Additionally, it does not seek to be an exhaustive account of Wells and his overall intellectual outlook. Rather, with a particular emphasis on Wells’s attitudes to warfare, it attempts to further integrate Wells into the cultural and intellectual history of the First World War through the use both of the metaphor of “misfit” and of the “last war” declaration. When tracing the origins of Wells’s 1914 declaration, it becomes clear that the “war to end all wars” declaration was neither prophetic nor a product of war enthusiasm, but rather part of consistent prewar intellectual attitudes towards warfare that Wells would cling to long after the First World War.¹² Also, Wells was by no means the pacifist he claimed to be, often finding a future war as a tool for creating the utopian world state he envisioned. Finally, Wells over the life of his literary career created a mythology of himself—whether he intended it or not—as a misfit in all times, with his depictions of war, the shape of the sociopolitical order, and the lack of receptiveness by his society as the source of his imagination—and, ultimately, his frustration. Warren Wagar has asserted that Wells “traversed time” throughout

¹¹ “H. G. Wells,” *Manchester Guardian*, 14 Aug. 1946, 4.

¹² John Partington has remarked similarly on the consistency of Wells’s political thought throughout his career. See John S Partington, *Building Cosmopolis: The Political Thought of H. G. Wells* (Burlington, 2003), 1–2.

most of his work.¹³ Perhaps it is useful to add that Wells's travels through time were often driven by one common theme: dissatisfaction with his own world and his dream of a better one. Such dreams compelled Wells to write from the perspective of a better—or worse—time than his own. This article argues that a mythology of Wells as a “misfit” can be derived from the recurring criticism he levelled against his own sociopolitical order within his overall approach to warfare. From the perspective of the future, which often involved the outbreak of an apocalyptic war, Wells was able to express his vision of a “better” world order. Furthermore, as will be seen through the example of *When the Sleeper Wakes* (1899), Wells was equally capable within the context of his other work of depicting a dystopian future arising from the *absence* of a “last war”—in essence, a future without an apocalyptic war would create a dystopian world based around extremes that he believed contemporary realities would produce.

WELLS ON WAR

Wells's initial use of prophecy as a rhetorical device in his early works was influenced by the rising popularity of a subgenre in Victorian popular fiction that historians have called “future war fiction.” While not an entirely new phenomenon, the general form that the genre took in this period began with “The Battle of Dorking” (1871) by George T. Chesney, a colonel in the Indian Army. Published anonymously at first in *Blackwood's Magazine*, the work centres on the reminiscences of an old man set forty years in the future, describing the successful invasion of Britain by an unnamed German-speaking nation. In the aftermath, Britain experiences a bleak future: the empire collapses, the nation is left impoverished, and Britain is reduced to a state of insignificance in a new global order. To give his political concerns greater impetus, Chesney turned to contemporary diplomatic concerns provoked by the results of the Franco-Prussian War to attack the Gladstone government. Military matters are central to the narrative, especially the state of the British Army, but Chesney also turned to perceived economic and social problems, such as British dependency on food imports and the “weakness” of middle-class urban society. “The Battle of Dorking” became a huge success that year and stirred up enough anxiety within the reading public that Prime Minister Gladstone ordered a review of military preparedness in the event of a foreign invasion.¹⁴ Up to the outbreak of war in 1914, hundreds of authors would take advantage of various actual (or imagined) diplomatic crises, such as the Channel Tunnel debates in Parliament

¹³ W Warren Wagar, *H. G. Wells: Traversing Time* (Middletown, 2004), 4. See also Simon J James, *Maps of Utopia: H. G. Wells, Modernity, and the End of Culture* (Oxford, 2012).

¹⁴ Clarke, *Voices Prophesying War*, 27–56.

during the 1880s, the creation of the Franco-Russian Alliance in 1892, and the growing rivalry with Germany at the *fin de siècle*, in order to write so-called apocalyptic prophecies if readers failed either to reform themselves or to press the government into implementing some new policy.¹⁵ By the 1890s, however, the tone of these works became increasingly xenophobic and militaristic, with many claiming that thousands of foreign spies disguised as waiters, tourists, and even “hairdressers” throughout the country were preparing for a surprise invasion. With the overall social Darwinist premise of a hostile, jealous world seeking to exploit the weakness of a wealthy, isolated Britain, the moral of these stories was essentially the same: the country needed to adopt “national service” (a more palatable term for conscription) in order to save itself from foreign aggression and social degeneration. Whether or not these stories are a true representation of the mood of the general public is debatable—conscription came only in the midst of war in 1916—but they were nevertheless very popular amongst readers, with William Le Queux’s *Invasion of 1910* (1906) selling over six million copies worldwide.

Although these stories are largely forgotten, one work has stood the test of time: H. G. Wells’s *War of the Worlds*. Wells embraced this genre while also departing from it in many significant ways. Predominantly a politically conservative genre, it aimed at inciting fear in readers with increasingly xenophobic, militaristic narratives. Wells, a self-proclaimed socialist, used the genre to conduct his own critique of European imperialism. In a *Daily News* article, he claimed that the idea came to him while in conversation with his brother, who asked “how would it be with us . . . if some creatures of a vastly superior power came down upon us and behaved like a drunken man-of-war’s crew let loose among some gentle savages?”¹⁶ In the opening pages, Wells reminded his readers that “before we judge of [the Martians] too harshly, we must remember what ruthless and utter destruction our own species has wrought . . . upon its own inferior races.”¹⁷ Like Joseph Conrad in *Heart of Darkness* (1899), Wells utilized commonplace racial language to critique the nature of European imperialism—the British become the “inferior race” subjected to the violence of the older, more evolved Martians—but focused on science fiction to shape his criticism. While its anticipation of military

¹⁵ Ibid., pp. 93–130; In addition to *Battle of Dorking*, other notable works included Philip Colomb *et al.*, *The Great War of 189–* (1892); Erskine Childers, *The Riddle of the Sands* (1903); H. H. Munro (pseud. Saki), *When William Came* (1913); William Le Queux, *The Great War in England in 1897* (1894) and *The Invasion of 1906* (1910); and Arthur Conan Doyle, *Danger!* (1914). The genre was also not without its parodies, the most notable being P. G. Wodehouse, *The Swoop!, or How Clarence Saved England* (1909).

¹⁶ “The Scientific Novel,” *Daily News*, 26 Jan. 1898, 6.

¹⁷ H. G. Wells, *The War of the Worlds* (Leipzig, 1898), 14.

developments that would come to fruition in the First World War, notably poison gas (“black smoke”) and total warfare, do give credence to his ability at prophecy, a subtler aspect of this work requires added exploration. In the epilogue to *The War of the Worlds*, the narrator seeks some positive potential consequences for humanity in the aftermath of the failed Martian invasion:

It may be that in the larger design of the universe this invasion from Mars is not without its ultimate benefit for men; it has robbed us of that serene confidence in the future which is the most fruitful source of decadence, the gifts to human science it has brought are enormous, and it has done much to promote the conception of the commonwealth of mankind.¹⁸

This is one of Wells’s first literary expressions of his overall attitude towards war and society, which would reach its apex during the First World War. Through the experience of a war of annihilation, Wells, under the guise of the narrator and an enlightened “artilleryman,” imagines that humanity would come to its senses and take his prescription to cure its decrepit state: a strong dose of pessimism, scientific progress through education, and the foundation of a world state without religion. As Wagar has noted, Wells held two beliefs distinct from his contemporaries on what future warfare would hold for humanity: the possibility of civilization collapsing into a “new Dark Ages,” or the opportunity for more enlightened individuals to rise to power and build a world state.¹⁹ With the fall of the Martians, humans avoid a new Dark Ages, and the destruction of the “old” world allows more enlightened individuals to seize power in the aftermath. While Wells imagined the development of a scientific utopia in his writing, he did so by turning to war as the source of the revolutionary change that would bring it about.

Indeed, war was so central to Wells’s idea of a future world state that its absence provoked dystopian visions of the future, notably *When the Sleeper Wakes*, to critique the current social and political order and where it would take the world should it be allowed to survive. In *The Time Machine*, Wells examined similar themes through the split evolution of humanity into the Eloi and the Morlocks to represent the growing gap between the upper and lower classes. There is, however, greater political immediacy in *When the Sleeper Wakes*. Nevertheless, while the press praised the work for its imaginative story, it did not take his politics or message seriously. The *Morning Post* wrote that “as a novel his book is of small account; as an attempt to follow out tendencies to possible, if, we may hope, improbable conclusions, it is marked by no small share of vivid imagination,” while the reviewer for *The Observer* marveled at his imagination, but concluded,

¹⁸ Ibid., 285.

¹⁹ Wagar, *Traversing Time*, 136.

“I must confess that I prefer to be charmed rather than terrified.”²⁰ Following the plot device of Edward Bellamy’s *Looking Backward* (1888), a man named Graham falls into a deep trance in 1897, awaking in the year 2100 to discover that he has acquired an enormous fortune from compound interest accumulated on a trust in his name. A World Council uses his wealth to create a plutocratic world state, but it is overthrown by a revolutionary named Ostrog driven to action upon Graham’s awakening. Rather than enacting the principles of the revolution that he led, Ostrog instead embraces the privileges of the World Council and societal elites that reside in “Pleasure Cities” located above the working classes, using African soldiers—a scandalous idea for a European reader at the *fin de siècle*—to crush his own revolutionary movement. In *Experiment in Autobiography*, Wells recounted that rather than being purely “prophecy,” *When the Sleeper Wakes* “was essentially an exaggeration of contemporary tendencies: higher buildings, bigger towns, wickeder capitalists and labour more downtrodden than ever and more desperate.”²¹ While Bellamy anticipated that capitalism would naturally lead to a socialist utopia through the total nationalization of industry without a resort to revolutionary violence or war, Wells believed that simply allowing the contemporary sociopolitical order to continue unabated would produce the dystopian world that Graham witnessed, with the unfettered expansion of capitalism ultimately dominating governments and any ideological opposition that stood in its path, thus making positive change an impossibility.²² Looking back at the history of the world he had missed, Graham discovered that “Socialistic and Popular Reactionary and Purity Parties were all at last mere Stock Exchange counters, selling their principles to pay for their electioneering.” Ultimately, he realizes how his fortune had shaped the world during his slumber: “The whole world was exploited, a battlefield of businesses; and financial convulsions, the scourge of currency manipulation, tariff wars, made more human misery during the twentieth century—because the wretchedness was dreary life instead of speedy death—than had war, pestilence and famine, in the darkest hours of earlier history.”²³ *When the Sleeper Wakes* did not prove to be a very successful work for Wells, but it shows a consistency in his world view and the centrality of war within it: economic exploitation offered a bleaker future than war. Focusing

²⁰ “Recent Fiction: Machinery in Motion,” *Morning Post*, 25 May 1899, 2; L.F.A., “Reviews: The Prophet Wells,” *The Observer*, 28 May 1899, 7.

²¹ Wells, *Experiment in Autobiography*, vol. 2, 645.

²² Edward Bellamy, *Looking Backward, 2000–1887* (Boston, 1889), 70–81. It seems necessary to note that while *Looking Backward* provoked many literary responses, *When the Sleeper Wakes* was not part of this literature. Since *When the Sleeper Wakes* shares a similar plot device, *Looking Backward* deserves at least some acknowledgement.

²³ Wells, *When the Sleeper Wakes* (London, 1899), 171–2.

on unchecked capitalism and its potential consequences, *When the Sleeper Wakes* condemns the existence of the contemporary socioeconomic order, finding the conditions that came with it undesirable and its perpetuation unacceptable. Wells wrote of the future in either utopian or dystopian terms to reject his own world, but what is most striking is the constructive place of war in his utopian rather than in his dystopian works, which surfaces if *When the Sleeper Wakes* is placed into a wider context. For Wells, rather than class conflict or peaceful reform along socialist or Marxist lines, war is imagined as the engine of sweeping sociopolitical change according to his own utopian standards.

His works directly associated with warfare, however, best reveal the way he envisioned the rise of his utopia. In the nonfictional *Anticipations* (1901), first serialized in the *Fortnightly Review*, Wells considered how technological developments would impact future wars. In addition to his short story “The Land Ironclads,” the discussion of warfare in *Anticipations* indirectly addresses the thesis offered by the Polish economist and pacifist Ivan Bloch in his work *The Future of War* (1898), which argued that technological developments in warfare had negated the political utility of future wars, which would inevitably end in exhaustion and social revolution, especially in more urban, affluent nations like Britain.²⁴ “The Land Ironclads,” written in the immediate aftermath of the Boer War (1899–1902), argued that an educated urban society would negate the perceived strategic deadlock in warfare that Bloch had envisioned by means of armored vehicles and other technological innovations to break through defensive positions, thus allowing war to maintain future political utility within Wells’s world view.²⁵ *Anticipations* further expands on Wells’s wider social and political views. In a letter from 1901, Wells claimed that the purpose of the work was to “undermine and destroy the monarch, monogamy, faith in God & respectability & the British Empire, all under the guise of a speculation about motor cars & electrical heating.” He wrote similarly to Joseph Edwards, stating that the work was “in effect the prospectus of a new revolutionary movement.”²⁶ In a retort to Winston Churchill, Wells declared, “I do sincerely believe that Liberalism (as Gladstone knew it) is as dead as Adam and that there is an urgent need for an ordered body of doctrine” to replace it.²⁷ Essentially, Wells intended *Anticipations*

²⁴ See Bloch, *The Future of War*; for historical criticism of this work see Antulio J Echevarria, *After Clausewitz: German Military Thinkers before the Great War* (Lawrence, 2000), 65–93, Michael Howard, “Men against Fire: The Doctrine of the Offensive in 1914,” in Peter Paret, ed., *Makers of Modern Strategy: From Machiavelli to the Nuclear Age* (Princeton, 1986), 510–26.

²⁵ Wells, “The Land Ironclads,” *Strand Magazine*, 26 (July–Dec. 1903), 751–64.

²⁶ David C. Smith, ed., *The Correspondence of H. G. Wells*, 4 vols. (London, 1998), 1: 378–9, 383.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 457.

to be his political manifesto calling for the creation of a “new republic” controlled by an educated world elite that would eradicate national, racial, and class distinction through a conscious policy of eugenics. In consideration of his writing during the First World War, his depiction of the evolution of warfare at the *fin de siècle* played an integral role in the creation of this “new republic.” Noting the technological changes in warfare leading up to 1901, Wells believed that radical social changes were required for success in a future war:

The nation that produces in the near future the largest proportional development of educated . . . and intellectually active people of all sorts; the nation that most resolutely picks over, educates, sterilizes, exports, or poisons its people of the abyss . . . will certainly be the nation that will be the most powerful in warfare as in peace, will certainly be the ascendant or dominant nation before the year 2000.

Once again, according to Wells, the necessities of modern warfare would force societies to improve themselves through education and the eradication of various “people of the abyss.” Ultimately, he believed that such social change might “bring patriotism under control” and lead to the decline of the nation state, which he saw as the main source of war.²⁸ To Wells, a preoccupation with war would end the nation state, and eventually war itself.

In 1908, Wells continued to reflect on what he saw as the inherent danger of the nation state in the contemporary world with *The War in the Air*. It is also one of the first times in fiction that he directly criticized the German *Kaiserreich*. In the years leading up to the war, Wells proclaimed in the press that “for a decade and more all Western Europe has been threatened by German truculence . . . The German has been the provocator and leader of all modern armaments.”²⁹ With *The War in the Air*, Wells characterized Germany as one of the “most spirited and aggressive powers in the world,” behind only the United States and, despite its racist dismissal by the imperial powers, Japan. He claimed that Germany was driven by “its dream of imperial expansion, and its imposition of the German language upon a forcibly united Europe” (the latter prospect perhaps most appalling to an Englishman!).³⁰ To personify what he saw as the epitome of German nationalism, Wells created the fictitious Prince Karl Albert—partly a caricature of Kaiser Wilhelm, who would be blamed for the war in the air and the fall of civilization: Prince Karl Albert “was the darling of the Imperialist spirit in Germany . . . the national passion for aggression found in him its supreme

²⁸ H. G. Wells, *Anticipations of the Reaction of Mechanical and Scientific Progress upon Human Life and Thought* (New York 1902), 230–31.

²⁹ H. G. Wells, *An Englishman Looks at the World: Being a Series of Unrestrained Remarks upon Contemporary Matters* (London, 1914), 143; this is a collection of journalist articles written by Wells from 1909 to 1914.

³⁰ H. G. Wells, *The War in the Air* (New York, 1917), 101–2.

exponent, and achieved through him its realisation in this astounding war . . . all over the world his ruthless strength dominated minds as the Napoleonic legend had dominated minds.”³¹

The War in the Air follows the adventures of an ordinary bicycle mechanic named Bert Smallways, a first-hand witness of the “war in the air.” On the surface, the work critiques the global arms race of the early twentieth century. The story of the war begins with a German invasion of the United States with a massive fleet of airships and small “drachenflieger” craft that devastate everything in their path. Unbeknownst to Germany or the United States, the Confederation of East Asia (Wells’s manifestation of the “Yellow Peril”) had constructed a larger, more advanced air fleet that embarks on its own invasion of America from the west. These events only escalate global tensions, as “every organised Government in the world was frantically and vehemently building airships . . . and in a few hours all the panic-fierce world was . . . at war in the most complicated way.” This leap in military technology leads to further chaos, as “one unique and terrifying aspect of this development was the swiftness with which these monsters could be produced . . . the airship was remarkably simple to construct.”³² In the end, the war itself deadlocks, and civilization collapses. For most of the work, Wells describes the destruction of his world and criticizes the short-sightedness of his contemporaries in their adaption to technological change. Initially, the *War in the Air* appears to be a dystopian vision of war. Indeed, much of the storyline and elements within it meet such a description. By the final chapter, however, the work shifts abruptly from being an account of the experience of Bert Smallways to a history from a distant utopian future:

To men living in our present world state, orderly, scientific and secured, nothing seems so precarious, so giddily dangerous, as the fabric of the social order with which the men of the opening of the twentieth century were content. To us it seems that every institution and relationship was the fruit of haphazard and tradition and the manifest sport of chance . . .³³

Even though the “war in the air” pushes humanity into a new Dark Ages, Wells still cannot avoid the dream of a world state in the end. Wells goes on to critique the existence of cultural and political tradition and the fundamental organization of society. He believed that societal complacency stemmed from massive material improvement experienced at that time, which made people oblivious to the threat of the arms race that would ultimately destroy their civilization. What is most ominous about this excerpt is that although Wells depicts the violent

³¹ Ibid., 107–8.

³² Ibid., 248.

³³ Ibid., 351–2.

downfall of the civilization that he so detested, he returns once again to the eventual establishment of his ideal world state as the inevitable consequence of this destruction. The choice is no longer “Dark Ages” or “enlightened intervention.” Rather, the two options become inseparable from one another. Essentially, *The War in the Air* is not a tale of foreboding by Wells, but rather an apocalyptic fantasy, where human civilization must destroy itself before a future, more appropriate, world order can be established. It was the sheer existence of Wells’s own world that inhibited the creation of his utopia, and its destruction became an intellectual necessity to him.

Aside from simply imagining war, Wells also developed a keen interest in “playing” at war that culminated in *Little Wars* (1913), a work which continues to set many of the standards for miniature war game simulations.³⁴ As noted by historian Kenneth Brown, this was not an entirely peculiar activity for the time, with leading literary and political figures ranging from Robert Louis Stevenson and G. K. Chesterton to C. P. Trevelyan and Winston Churchill sharing an interest in playing war games with toy soldiers.³⁵ Described in the appendix as “merely a game that may be played by two or four or six amateurish persons in an afternoon and evening with toy soldiers,” *Little Wars* claimed to have a higher, pacific purpose rather than being a *Kriegsspiel* for military training: “My game is just as good as [*Kriegsspiel*], and saner by reason of its size. Here is War, done down to rational proportions, and yet out of the way of mankind . . . You have only to play at Little Wars three or four times to realise just what a blundering thing Great War must be.” Despite paradoxically proposing a way to translate the game into a *Kriegsspiel*, Wells believed that his own war game would expose the horrible realities of war, declaring, “Not only are the masses of men and material and suffering and inconvenience too monstrously big for reason, but—the available heads we have for it, are too small.”³⁶ Like his earlier works, *Little Wars* aligned with Wells’s belief that the experience of war, even if just playing it as a game, would reshape peoples’ attitudes towards it by exposing it as a futile endeavor due both to the overall costs and to the incompetence of those intended to lead armies in the field. In a way, *Little Wars* sows the seeds of what the “war to end all wars” would eventually come to mean in later cultural memory, with an understanding of modern war as a pointless slaughter and military men as “donkeys” carelessly

³⁴ Stephen Glick and L. Ian Charters, “War, Games, and Military History,” *Journal of Contemporary History*, 18/4 (Oct. 1983), 569–70.

³⁵ Kenneth Brown, “Modelling for War? Toy Soldiers in Late Victorian and Edwardian Britain,” *Journal of Social History*, 24/2 (1990), 237–54, at 241.

³⁶ H. G. Wells, *Little Wars: A Game for Boys from Twelve Years of Age to One Hundred and Fifty and for That More Intelligent Sort of Girls who Like Boys’ Games and Books* (London 1913), 99–101.

leading “lions” to their deaths. Reviewers at the time, however, seemed far more interested in the game itself than in any ulterior motive expressed by Wells in creating it. Remarking on the booklet’s uses as a *Kriegsspiel*, *The Spectator* wrote that “whatever may be its use for this higher (or, as Mr. Wells would have us think, lower) purpose, there can be no doubt at all as to the excellence of *Little Wars* as a game for its own sake.”³⁷

By 1914, Wells’s fantasy of the coming of his utopia perhaps reached its apocalyptic apex with *The World Set Free*. The plot itself is derived from *In the Days of the Comet* (1906), which depicts a world filled with hatred, jealousy, and war due in part to the sociopolitical order. As the world is on the brink of war and the jilted William Leadford attempts to kill his runaway bride and her lover, a comet disintegrates in the atmosphere, leaving behind a green vapor that causes humanity to spurn negative feelings and dedicate itself to the reorganization of society. In *The World Set Free*, Wells turns to a more ominous plot device: atomic weapons. In a letter to his publisher from 1913, he had originally intended the title to be “The Atom Liberates the World.”³⁸ Despite its destructive capacity, for Wells the atom acts as a benevolent, impersonal force that would confront human civilization with its death or salvation. Wells imagined that attaining the discovery of the apex of modern warfare would end the political order either through total annihilation or through the intervention of—once again—an enlightened elite that would reform society. By the second chapter—incidentally titled “The Last War,” the novel provides a futuristic history of the mid-twentieth century from the perspective of a “sane and ambitious social order,” writing of the outbreak of war between the Great Powers, where both sides unleash atomic weapons against one another.³⁹ Finally, the chapter ends with a reflection on the consequences of the war and what the creation and use of such destructive weapons signified:

For a time in western Europe at least it was indeed as if civilisation had come to a final collapse. These crowning buds upon the tradition that Napoleon planted and Bismarck watered opened and flared “like water-lilies of flame” over nations destroyed . . . fields lost to mankind forever, and a million weltering bodies. Was this lesson enough for mankind, or would the flames of war still burn amidst the ruins?⁴⁰

Looking back on *The World Set Free* in his autobiography, Wells wrote that while “atomic weapons” would result in the collapse of the social order, he believed that afterward “there was to be a wave of sanity—a disposition to believe in these spontaneous waves of sanity may be one of my besetting

³⁷ “*Little Wars* by H. G. Wells” (book review), *The Spectator*, 16 Aug. 1913, 252.

³⁸ Smith, *The Correspondence of H. G. Wells*, 2: 375.

³⁹ H. G. Wells, *The World Set Free: A Story of Mankind* (New York, 1914), 89–148.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 147.

weaknesses.”⁴¹ If his autobiography is any indication, Wells remained pessimistic of this vision. Such pessimism may have stemmed from reviews of the book, with *The Times* describing it as “a porridge composed of Mr. Wells’s vivid imagination, his discontents, and his Utopian aspirations,” while the *Illustrated London News* found its “Wellsian philosophy . . . the least convincing part of the characteristically Wellsian book.”⁴² The high-literary *Athenaeum* criticized Wells for his tendency “to believe that mankind as a whole can ever be brought to reconsider its position without some *deus ex machina*, some unnecessary violence to bring it to a halt on its way.”⁴³ *The Spectator* also remarked on Wells’s recurring inclination towards millennialism—now all too familiar with readers, concluding that “when next Mr. Wells takes in hand the demolition of the universe we trust he will provide us with a more attractive sequel.”⁴⁴ Nevertheless, despite being a self-proclaimed “sane” misfit in a mad world, Wells continued to critique the sociopolitical order and campaign for his world state. If book reviews of *The World Set Free* are any indication, however, British readers in 1914 were already well aware of the “porridge” that made up his utopian world. Even the liberal-oriented *Manchester Guardian* compared Wells’s sociopolitical voice to that of a “village Isaiah . . . usually heard with veiled indifference until they go home.”⁴⁵ It seems, then, that Wells had oversaturated the British reading public with his ideas by the time a real opportunity arose for Wells to promote his ideas: the outbreak of the First World War.

WELLS AT WAR

On 5 August 1914, the day after Britain entered the First World War, Wells wrote in the *New York Times* on his reasons for supporting British involvement in the conflict. He labeled the struggle a “righteous war” against German imperialism and militarism, and suggested that with an Allied victory “it may be possible to anticipate the end of the armaments phase of European history . . . the way will be open at last for all these Western powers to organize a peace.” These efforts to mobilize public support for the conflict would result in the pamphlet *The War That Will End War*. In shaping his own war aims, Wells declared the conflict to be “not of nations, but of mankind. It is a war to exorcise a world-madness and

⁴¹ Wells, *Experiment in Autobiography*, vol. 2, 666.

⁴² “The World Set Free” (review), *The Times*, 8 May 1914, 6; “Novels of the Month,” *Illustrated London News—Literary Supplement*, 6 June 1914.

⁴³ “World Set Free” (book review), *The Athenaeum*, 9 May 1914, 652.

⁴⁴ “*The World Set Free*” (book review), *The Spectator*, 16 May 1914, 836–7.

⁴⁵ “The Severity of Mr. H. G. Wells,” *Manchester Guardian*, 26 Feb. 1914, 6.

end an age.”⁴⁶ Essentially, Wells believed that the outbreak of war in 1914 signaled the beginning of the age that he could only dream of in his prewar work, and he worked tirelessly throughout the conflict to make this dream a reality. While prophecy does appear at times within the pamphlet—Wells, like many others, incorrectly predicted that the war would last a matter of months rather than years—propaganda for the formation of a world state is central to *The War That Will End War*.

Twenty years later, Wells rejected his call for the “war to end all wars,” using his image as a prophet to mask his past failures as a propagandist. He insisted that his “last war” declaration was a product of his own spontaneous war enthusiasm rather than any “intellectual previsions” that he had held before the outbreak of the conflict. To dismiss this reflection as nothing more than a rationalization of failed prophecy assumes that Wells was simply a “prophet,” and that prophecy itself by Wells and others had no ulterior, contemporary political motive. It is perhaps more accurate, then, to view his wartime writing as a continuation of the ideas that he had circulated before 1914. As John Partington has argued, the First World War allowed Wells to elaborate on his world-state vision and its practicality, which he outlined in *The War That Will End War* and his other wartime works.⁴⁷ Much like in *War in the Air*, Wells attacked not German society, but rather the German government, which he blamed not only for the outbreak of the conflict, but also for the escalation of diplomatic tensions throughout the world since German unification in 1871:

We are fighting Germany. But we are fighting without any hatred of the German people . . . we have to destroy an evil system of government and the mental and material corruption that has got hold of the German imagination and taken possession of German life. We have to smash the Prussian Imperialism as thoroughly as Germany in 1871 smashed the rotten Imperialism of Napoleon III.⁴⁸

The War That Will End War represents not a departure from, but rather a continuation of, Wells’s dream of creating a new world order as expressed in his writing up to the outbreak of the conflict. Rather than a prophetic claim that the First World War would be “the war to end all wars,” the work reads more as a propaganda piece in favor of war aims for British society to mobilize itself behind. As Partington has acknowledged, it was restatement of sociopolitical ideas shared by Wells for decades imposed on the events of 1914: humanity must intervene in wartime to create a more peaceful sociopolitical order—meaning the Wellsian world state—or war itself would destroy civilization. Such an interpretation

⁴⁶ Wells, *War That Will End War*, 11.

⁴⁷ Partington, *Building Cosmopolis*, 65–83.

⁴⁸ Wells, *War That Will End War*, 11.

draws from Simon James, who asserted that “Wells’s Utopia is not a lotus-eating paradise of doing as one likes, but a world that requires a substantial amount of work to construct.”⁴⁹ Essentially, the world state of Wells is not prophesied, but rather proposed to readers, who must choose to build it themselves. Instead of speculation on the future itself, topics ranged from calls for disarmament to a turn to “Liberalism,” redrawing the map of Europe—particularly the Balkans—beseeching the British left to support Russia, and appealing for the United States to enter the war. Most important of all to Wells, however, was to “end not simply a war, but the idea of war.” Wells even went as far as to label the work itself “propaganda” directed at the “common sense and common feeling of humanity” to destroy the sociopolitical order that he believed had led to war in the first place.⁵⁰ Thus Wells offered in *The War That Will End War* the blueprint for the construction of his utopia. For reviewers in 1914 who saw the pamphlet as prophecy, there was a mixture of skepticism and admiration:

Mr. Wells is more confident than we are that this war is “the last”; but if we cannot see with him in this respect, we can admit the sterling worth of his own view of the battlefield and its consequences . . . He appeals to every thinking man, and insists on the fact that every one of us is immediately concerned in the pursuance of this war that peace may eventually come.⁵¹

Prophecy or not, Wells’s attempts to mobilize support for his vision of the war achieved mixed results at best. In another review of his work, *The Independent* doubted his claim that Britain entered the war on account of Belgium and Luxemburg, but nevertheless concluded that “some of his suggestions as to ways of securing peace in the future are worth considering,” while the *Times Literary Supplement* noted that “the title of these reprinted papers will seem to many over-confident and even illusory,” while also praising some of his ideas.⁵² The British writer Walter Shaw Sparrow also wrote a highly critical article in the conservative *Saturday Review* on the various novelists like Wells whose “influence has political dangers of its own which level-headed men ought to counteract as soon as possible.” Turning to *The War That Will End War*, he lambasted Wells for “the militancy which, in a good many books, has achieved fame for him,” demanding that “he ought to know, as we know, that the British nation fights,

⁴⁹ James, *Maps of Utopia*, 131.

⁵⁰ Wells, *War That Will End War*, 91–3.

⁵¹ “*The War That Will End War*, H. G. Wells” (book review), *Academy and Literature*, 17 Oct. 1914, 380–81.

⁵² “The New Books: The Latest War Literature,” *The Independent*, 21 Dec. 1914, 476; “A War against Militarism,” *Times Literary Supplement*, 669 (12 Nov. 1914), 501.

not for a dream about everlasting peace, but for her existence.”⁵³ Overall, in spite of being a popular collection of essays in the early days of the war, *The War That Will End War* contained a message that many saw as admirable, albeit naive, but either unobtainable or a false interpretation of the war. Thus, rather than being a prophecy that failed due to the course of the war, the “last war” declaration of Wells already lacked credibility and novelty to readers in 1914.

While Wells hoped that his intellectual call to arms would rally readers to his cause, his activity in the war appears to have done quite the opposite. Perhaps the biggest consequence of Wells’s support for the conflict was his further alienation from his fellow socialists. From the start of the war, much of the British left objected to allying with Russia, given its autocratic government. Wells, by contrast, publicly supported siding with Russia in a letter published on 23 December for “Russian Men of Letters” in the *Manchester Guardian* and sparred with the British left in letters to the editor for *Labour Leader* and *The Nation*. He also engaged in a hostile debate with George Bernard Shaw in the British press over Russia and the war throughout 1914.⁵⁴ Perhaps most controversial amongst his fellow British socialists was not only the fact that Wells supported the war, but also the fact that he joined the war propaganda office headed by the conservative, Germanophobic news mogul Lord Northcliffe, owner and editor of the *Daily Mail*, *The Times*, and other major national newspapers. Despite his self-proclaimed hatred for war, Wells held a prominent place in fact and fiction for such an activity within his own political vision. Although he self-identified as a “socialist,” he held ideas and aspirations that often crossed (and came into conflict with) various political lines.⁵⁵

According to Wells, “no intelligent brain that passed through the Great War emerged without being profoundly changed.”⁵⁶ This myth of the First World War as a cultural watershed, which Wells and other writers consciously promoted, has come to dominate the understanding of the conflict. Samuel Hynes asserts that Wells was one of the first to articulate this attitude in *Boon*.⁵⁷ With *Boon*, Wells consciously called for a rejection of prewar culture, which he labeled outdated

⁵³ Walter Shaw Sparrow, “Political Novelists and Their New Humanity,” *Saturday Review*, 27 March 1915, 326–7. The “defensive” war interpretation has received increased attention in studies of motivation during the war. See Alexander Watson, *Enduring the Great War: Combat, Morale and Collapse in the German and British Armies, 1914–1918* (Cambridge, 2008), 44–84. See also note 8 above on “war enthusiasm” literature.

⁵⁴ See Smith, *The Correspondence of H. G. Wells*, 2: 379–401, 406–12.

⁵⁵ This does not intend to identify “socialist” or “British left” as a monolith. For more on liberal attitudes to war leading up to the First World War see Matthew Johnson, *Militarism and the British Left, 1902–1914* (New York, 2013).

⁵⁶ Wells, *Experiment in Autobiography*, vol. 2, 667.

⁵⁷ Hynes, *A War Imagined*, 24.

and undesirable for a postwar world. In the work, Wells attacks the Edwardian playwright and novelist Henry James to criticize what was wrong with the state of prewar literature. Before the war, despite their friendship, Wells and James were at odds regarding the purpose of literature and the arts. While Wells preferred to direct his art towards social and political commentary, James preferred “art for art’s sake,” arguing that Wells and others like him were “prostituting their art.”⁵⁸ In *Boon*, Wells wrote that James “went about elaborately, avoiding ugliness, death, suffering, industrialism, politics, sport, the thought of war, the red blaze of passion . . . His ‘Ypres’ was wonderful.”⁵⁹ Essentially, Wells found in James the embodiment of Edwardian culture, which he saw as a backward, sanitizing force in opposition to his desire to revolutionize the sociopolitical order in fact and in fiction. With the war, Wells claimed in *Boon* that “we perceived we were in the beginnings of a far vaster conflict; the end of an age; the slow, murderous testing and condemnation of whole systems of ideas that had bound men uneasily in communities for all our lives.”⁶⁰

Despite his call to reject the prewar world in *Boon*, Wells’s journalism during the war showed that Britain had little, if any, interest in doing so. As Simon James has noted, Wells’s tone became increasingly frustrated “once actual historical events caught up with those foretold in his fiction.”⁶¹ For most of the war, Wells wrote journalistic articles for the *Daily Mail*, *Daily Chronicle*, *Daily News*, and other major newspapers. Many of these articles were quickly compiled into larger pamphlets, to support the war and envision the shape of the postwar world. There is often a sense of frustration in these pieces, however, as Wells sought an explanation to justify his prophetic (or political) failings. To this effect, he maintained a prophetic voice, but over time his wartime propaganda trumped his attempts at wider prophecy during the war. In an article from 1916, he directly considered his use of prophecy throughout his literary career, highlighting both his accuracies and his inaccuracies. This article, entitled “Forecasting the Future,” quickly falters from its proclaimed attempt at prophecy and begins to dwell more on the possibility of his world state becoming a product of the war. Wells admitted later in his biography that he wished he could “just let [*What is Coming?*] decay and char and disappear and say nothing about it,” stating that he found it a “haphazard” attempt to understand “popular prejudices” that stood in the way of his vision.⁶² Although he perceived general complacency among the public,

⁵⁸ David C. Smith, H. G. Wells, *Desperately Mortal: A Biography* (New Haven, 1986) 168–70.

⁵⁹ Reginald Bliss (pseud. H. G. Wells), *Boon, The Mind of the Race, The Wild Asses of the Devil, and the Last Trump* (New York, 1915), 113.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 272.

⁶¹ James, *Maps of Utopia*, 161.

⁶² Wells, *Experiment in Autobiography*, vol. 2, 679–81.

Wells remained convinced that the nature of the war would compel them to embrace his idea for a world state, asserting that “the present war . . . is producing changes in men’s minds that may presently give us both the needed energy and the needed organisation from which a world direction may develop.”⁶³ *The Bystander*, however, dismissed Wells’s persistent optimism near the end of 1916. Admitting that while many might have believed him in 1914, the idea of the “war to end war” had faded:

As you scan the faces of passers-by, or sitters within the gate, you see many expressions of countenance . . . But on the faces of none of these, not even of the beggar who asks for a banknote at the street corner, do you see any look of anything remotely resembling “horror” or the desire to end (a) war in general or (b) this war in particular.⁶⁴

Wells also visited the western and Italian fronts as a correspondent in 1916, culminating in the pamphlet *War and the Future* (1917)—also known as *Italy, France and Britain at War*, in which he defied wartime censorship over his criticism of military officers.⁶⁵ While a large portion of the work focuses on his observations in France and Italy, the latter part of the book attempts to understand the public mood, citing the “native indolence of the human mind” and “tranquillising platitude” as the greatest sources of human indifference to his project of reshaping the sociopolitical order during the war. Some reviews criticized the latter aspect of the work, with the *English Review* writing that “catching Mr. Wells in this attitude, one does not know whether to laugh at such *naïveté* or denounce him for amateurishness.”⁶⁶ Although he admitted that many “hate” war or find it “boring,” Wells insisted that such sentiments would not “end” war altogether and demanded that a “thinking-out process” was required.⁶⁷ He offered his own plan (again) for ending the war and preventing future conflict, such as closing the worldwide arms trade, establishing a “League of Peace” to resolve international disputes and limiting the size of national militaries—which would be used as internal police to enforce the League’s decisions and suppress any dissenting nations, and other ideas he had shared throughout his career. He concluded by stating that “this book tells of how I set out to see the war, and it is largely a conversation,” and that he hoped that everyone would come around

⁶³ H. G. Wells, *What Is Coming? A European Forecast* (New York, 1916), 19–20.

⁶⁴ A Sophist (pseud.), “‘War to End War’: A Few Sophistries,” *The Bystander*, 18 Oct. 1916, 118. The article as a whole is representative of the thesis put forth by Jay Winter that despite the carnage experienced by soldiers during the war, British society at home actually benefited as a whole during the war. See Jay Winter, *The Great War and the British People* (New York, 2003).

⁶⁵ Wells, *Experiment in Autobiography*, vol. 2, 692.

⁶⁶ “War and the Future” (book review), *English Review* (April 1917), 382–83.

⁶⁷ H. G. Wells, *Italy, France and Britain at War* (New York, 1917), 178–82.

to his way of thinking.⁶⁸ Unfortunately, it seems that few did come around, with the *History Teacher's Magazine* in 1918 describing its significance as “chiefly interesting for those who care to know what Mr. Wells thinks.”⁶⁹

The novel *Mr. Britling Sees It Through* (1916) became Wells's greatest wartime success, representing a semi-fictional portrait—Mr. Britling is clearly Wells—of wartime experience in Britain. The story focuses on the character Mr Britling and his personal transformation during the war, especially his struggle to find meaning in the conflict after the death of his son at the front. Wells fills the narrative with his own sociopolitical aspirations that he had previously expressed during the conflict. As the war breaks out, Mr Britling begins working on a pamphlet conspicuously titled “And Now War Ends” to call for the creation of a world peace with the defeat of Germany, but the fears of food shortages and currency devaluation showed him an incompatible “vision of a world confused and disorganised.” One reviewer in *The Sphere*, however, cited such social criticism as one of the work's few limitations, stating that “Mr. Wells, although I believe he calls himself a Socialist, is thoroughly a Prussian at heart. Idealism and sentiment play but little part in his scheme of the universe. He would be quite unable to understand national aspiration independently of a well-ordered world.”⁷⁰ Like Wells, Mr Britling soon finds out that the rest of Britain is at odds with his vision of the war:

Everywhere cunning, everywhere small feuds and hatreds, distrusts, dishonesties, timidities, feebleness of purpose, dwarfish imaginations, swarm over the great and simple issues . . . It is a war now like any other . . . it is a war without point, a war that has lost its soul . . . a demonstration in vast and tragic forms of the stupidity and ineffectiveness of our species . . .⁷¹

Wells, under the guise of the fictional Mr Britling, expresses his frustration not in the war, but in the fact that he believed that the rest of society had proven unwilling to make the conflict an “unordinary” war. Like Wells, Mr Britling eventually begins writing “an essay of preposterous ambitions, for the title of it was ‘The Better Government of the World’” to propose his plan for the postwar world.⁷² Samuel Hynes interprets *Britling* as “the story, in short, of a change in the way ordinary people . . . understood the war, as it entered their lives,” arguing that it represented a “turn of mind” from idealism to disillusion in British society

⁶⁸ Ibid., 263–7, 283–4.

⁶⁹ “War Supplement: A Selected Critical Bibliography of the War,” *History Teacher's Magazine*, 1 March 1918, 160.

⁷⁰ “A Literary Letter: Mr. H. G. Wells on the War,” *The Sphere*, 30 Sept. 1916, 298.

⁷¹ H. G. Wells, *Mr. Britling Sees It Through* (New York, 1916), 359; also cited in Hynes, *A War Imagined*, 132.

⁷² Wells, *Britling*, 196, 417.

during the Battle of the Somme.⁷³ It is perhaps more accurate to view the work as a depiction of how the war affected Wells more than it did “ordinary people.” What is very present is the self-mythology of Wells as a misfit through the character Mr Britling, an idealist not aligned with the thinking of his times. As Mr Britling writes of his ideals and their possible fulfilment in the war, his contemporaries show far more interest in immediate concerns, such as food supply and financial status. Nevertheless, from his pamphlet “And Now War Ends” to “The Better Government of the World,” Mr Britling remains resilient in his conviction in spite of his peers and the personal loss that he endures with the death of his son, Hugh. His belief in what the war could accomplish might have diminished, but his own idealism remained relatively untarnished. It was people and their *lack* of his own idealism evident at the start of the war, not the *loss* of idealism during it, which had provoked the disillusionment of Mr Britling.

Despite the growing sense of disillusionment as the work progresses, Wells ends the story on a positive note, with Mr Britling turning to God as a source of his renewed optimism. While later rejected by Wells, readers and reviewers alike were puzzled by the way that he seemingly embraced the idea of God, for which he had shown nothing but contempt in the past.⁷⁴ Reviewers praised *Britling* for its insight into British society’s experience of the war, but found his foray into theology perplexing, with *The Observer* noting that “one wonders whether he has not for once lost his bearings and stumbled by misconception into a piece of pathology.”⁷⁵ This sudden reflection on God and religion, however, does not necessarily imply a deviation from Wells’s past views on such topics written before the war. Wagar has even gone as far as to interpret this experiment with theism as “a premeditated lie . . . to widen the circle of readers that [Wells] hoped to enlist in his campaign for a post-war new world order,” but ultimately left his existing followers feeling betrayed.⁷⁶ As early as *Anticipations*, Wells “predicted” that the future world state would “presume to no knowledge whatever, will presume to no possibility of knowledge of the real being of God.” He did not see this as a rejection of God, but rather as a positive reformulation of the relationship between humans and God.⁷⁷ By the time Wells wrote *Joan and Peter* (1918), his consistency is reflected in the character Peter in his dream-induced conversation

⁷³ Hynes, *A War Imagined*, 130–35.

⁷⁴ For more on Wells and the impact of religion on his ideas see Norman MacKenzie and Jeanne MacKenzie, *The Life of H. G. Wells: The Time Traveller* (London 1987), 312; and Willis Glover, “Religious Orientations of H. G. Wells: A Case Study in Scientific Humanism,” *Harvard Theological Review*, 65/1 (1972), 117–35.

⁷⁵ “Mr. Britling Sees It Through” (book review), *The Observer*, 24 Sept. 1916, 4.

⁷⁶ Wagar, *Traversing Time*, 157–8.

⁷⁷ Wells, *Anticipations*, 305–10.

with God and later admittance that God is beyond human understanding.⁷⁸ Thus, when Mr Britling–Wells turns to God as a source of hope to “see it through” the war, he does not stray from his past attitudes on religion, but rather brings them to the forefront of his world view.

Whether or not this turn to God during the war represented an intellectual shift of a different sort, Wells and his concept of the “last war” persisted. As the war progressed, Wells continued to campaign strongly for the establishment of the League of Nations and the creation of a lasting world peace. In the pamphlet *In the Fourth Year* (1918), while looking back on his wartime writing, Wells recalled that “a phrase, ‘The War to end War,’ got into circulation, amidst much sceptical comment” on account of its utopian nature. He insisted, however, that the idea remained “so urgent and necessary and so manifestly the sane thing before mankind that not to be busied upon it . . . is to be living outside of the contemporary life of the world.”⁷⁹ He argued that the conflict had confirmed that “it is impossible to contemplate a future for mankind from which [war] has not been eliminated,” and that “in some fashion it is now necessary to achieve sufficient human unity to establish a world peace and save the future of mankind.”⁸⁰ As he broke down his aims for peace in 1918, Wells continued to adhere to his belief in the “last war,” hoping that the final peace in the world war would turn this aspiration into a reality. Just like the pamphlet *The War That Will End War*, *In the Fourth Year* was structured as propaganda over prophecy. He did, however, tell readers of the potential consequences of a future war, warning that “the shock effects of the next war will have much the same relation to the shock effects of this, as the shock of breaking a finger-nail has to the shock of crushing in a body.” It was from this anticipated escalation of warfare that Wells concluded that “existing states have become impossible as absolutely independent sovereignties.”⁸¹ As the final results of the war and the turmoil of the interwar period show, H. G. Wells did not succeed and remained a misfit in the postwar world. Nevertheless, despite his failure during the war, Wells continued to campaign in his work to make his sociopolitical vision a reality, and remained convinced that it would arise from a “last war.”

WELLS AFTER WAR: CONCLUSION

In *Men Like Gods* (1923), Wells tells the story of a journalist named Mr Barnstaple, who becomes deeply disillusioned as “everywhere there was conflict,

⁷⁸ H. G. Wells, *Joan and Peter: The Story of an Education* (New York, 1918), 506–10, 579–80.

⁷⁹ H. G. Wells, *In the Fourth Year: Anticipations of a World Peace* (New York, 1918), v–vii.

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, 79–80.

⁸¹ *Ibid.*, 109–10.

everywhere unreason; seven-eighths of the world seemed to be sinking down towards chronic disorder and social dissolution.” He goes on holiday to escape his job, family, and anxieties, only to stumble upon Utopia in an alternate universe. From this experience, a renewed vigor returns to Barnstaple, who is determined to dedicate himself to the creation of a utopia for his own world, as “there was no knowledge in this Utopia of which Earth had not the germs, there was no power used here that Earthlings might not use.”⁸² As this novel shows, while Wells had essentially abandoned his call to make the First World War the “last war” during the conflict, he never strayed from his prewar utopian vision of it in the interwar period. As had been the case before the war, Wells remained an influential literary figure, but also a misfit amongst his contemporaries, with the utopian vision in *Men Like Gods* becoming a subject of ridicule for Aldous Huxley in *Brave New World* (1932).

Men Like Gods clearly represents the mood of H. G. Wells during the postwar period: disillusioned, but still persistent with his social and political goals. As before 1914, Wells maintained his self-mythology as a misfit, expressing his concern with the state of society and international affairs through prophecy and other literary devices, juxtaposing his own sanity with a world descending into chaos. Without even mentioning the First World War, the protagonist Barnstaple alludes to labor unrest, economic troubles, violence in Ireland, and the shaping of the League of Nations into a “melancholy and self-satisfied futility.”⁸³ The utopia of Wells remains much the same as it had before the war: class and conventional organized religions are eradicated as sociopolitical forces, world peace is established, technology flourishes, and nation states no longer exist. Barnstaple also reflects on a part of the history of Utopia called the “Last Age of Confusion,” which he believed “seemed to resemble the present time on earth.” In this age, the Utopians expanded and flourished in their world with the aid of significant scientific advancement. However, Barnstaple notes that “these things came . . . so rapidly and confusingly that it was only a small minority of people who realized the possibilities” that such an “expansion of knowledge” would bring, thus resulting in chaos and disorder.⁸⁴ It is highly likely that Wells considered himself among this “small minority” of people aware of the consequences of technological advancement before the First World War.

As *Men Like Gods* shows, Wells did not give up on his utopian dream of a world state and continued to write about it in fiction and nonfiction. And yet Wells still revealed a lingering awareness of the intellectual distance that remained between himself and his own society. While Barnstaple represents the contemporary

⁸² H. G. Wells, *Men Like Gods* (New York, 1923), 5, 310.

⁸³ *Ibid.*, 5.

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, 66–8.

utopian aspirations of Wells, the Earthling character Rupert Catskill, a caricature of Winston Churchill, adheres to reactionary ideas and plots to destroy Utopia. Perhaps most remarkably, even after the “last war,” Wells still found a place for war in his vision for how his world state would arise. In *The Outline of History* (1921) he predicted that “the increasing destructiveness and intolerableness of war waged with the new powers of science” would compel more people to advocate for it.⁸⁵ In perhaps his last great novel, entitled *The Shape of Things to Come* (1933), Wells envisioned a future with a prolonged Great Depression and Second World War compounded by the outbreak of a major plague. Out of the ashes, a small group of enlightened scientific minds in control of world transportation set up a world state, which abolishes all religions—Christianity being the last to resist—and forces the Jews to give up their ethnic identities in order to “properly” assimilate. It is this final struggle in *The Shape of Things to Come* to destroy nationalism, religion, and ethnic identity that Wells had imagined for decades. Soon after distancing himself from *The War That Will End War*, Wells wrote in his autobiography, “I remain persuaded that there will have to be one last conflict . . . to suppress [sovereign states] wherever they are found.”⁸⁶ Up to his death in 1946, Wells had to content himself merely with dreaming of his utopia and the “last war” that would create it, which he had achieved in fiction but never in fact.

In the final months of war in 1918, Charles à Court Repington, the military correspondent for the *Morning Post*, suggested that the current conflict be called the “First World War,” writing in his diary on 10 September that the name would “prevent the millennium folk from forgetting that the history of the world was the history of war.”⁸⁷ To some extents, H. G. Wells matches Repington’s description of the “millennium folk,” who saw the war as a tool for radical and lasting social change, which in effect would end war itself. Much to his dismay, Britain was fighting the First World War, not the “war to end all wars.” As the interwar years arrived, Wells continued to write in search of the utopian world order that he had hoped the “last war” would create. While he maintained his reputation as a popular author, the political ideas that informed much of his writing remained either far too idealistic or too radical for society to exist outside his own imagination. From the *fin de siècle* through the First World War and into the interwar period, H. G. Wells shaped himself into a misfit in all times: a writer with prophetic ability but also a political and social radical who often saw himself as at odds with his contemporaries. From this perspective, the use of prophecy

⁸⁵ H. G. Wells, *The Outline of History, Being a Plain History of Life and Mankind* (New York, 1921), 1092.

⁸⁶ Wells, *Experiment in Autobiography*, vol. 2, 667–8.

⁸⁷ Hynes, *A War Imagined*, 260–61.

by Wells shows the self-conscious way in which he saw himself in relation to his own society and how he envisioned escaping from it.

Simon James has observed that “the dominant mode of Wells’s later work is repetition.”⁸⁸ As can be seen from Wells’s work on warfare, this repetition began long before the First World War and had a dubious effect on the politics of contemporary readers. Rather than being simply swept up by the “war enthusiasm” of 1914, Wells wrote this work in a spirit not dissimilar to his past and future work. Rather than focusing on the elements and accuracies of prophecies within the works of H. G. Wells, it is perhaps far more appropriate to consider the fairly consistent message that he presents throughout much of his work on society, politics, and, most importantly for this study, war. Although he wrote far more on social and political themes, his work on warfare—Martian, armored, aerial, little, nuclear, future, and actual—relied heavily on these wider ideas. It is also from his works on war that a reader may get the best sense of what Wells meant in his imagined epitaph: that he was an enlightened misfit in a world filled with “*damned* fools” who would blindly embrace their downfall. When the First World War is labeled “the war to end all wars,” it is necessary to consider whether such a phrase broadly reflected the idealism of the societies embroiled in this brutal conflict, or of an imaginative writer who saw himself as antithetical to the sociopolitical order of his time. Wells had hoped to make the First World War into a “last war,” but an opportunity for change had become, in the words of Mr Britling, “a war now like any other.”

⁸⁸ James, *Maps of Utopia*, x.