

I've always found the writings of H.G. Wells hugely entertaining, as well as thought provoking. Such a verdict can be given to his novel 'The War In The Air' (Penguin pbk., Harmondsworth, 1979, orig. pub. 1908). Several themes are explored, and so the work can be regarded on several different levels. On an individual level it reveals how members of the Smallways family adapt to the brisk changes wrought by the ingenuity of science and technology. But as Wells wrote, 'No one troubled over the real dangers of mankind' (p229). Imperialistic designs, nationalism, and the build-up of arms threatened the stability of the world, whilst people like the Smallways lived and loved with no regard to the perils surrounding them. And the 'evil-spirited press, mercenary and unscrupulous, incapable of good and powerful for evil' brooded over the poor state of the worlds affairs like hungry vultures (p230). According to Wells the development of aerial navigation would have a profound impact on human society, and the Smallways and their like would find their life-styles irrevocably changed, for the worse. Indeed, 'For a time it had seemed that by virtue of machines and scientific civilization, Europe was to be lifted out of this perpetual round of animal drudgery, and that America was to evade it very largely from the outset. And with the smash of the high and dangerous and splendid edifice of mechanical civilization that had arisen so marvellously, back to the land came the common man, back to the manure' (p244). The catastrophe inflicted on humanity began when aerial machines were secretly built and tested by the majority of countries who were searching for a new military weapon. Early in the novel a character states how pioneers of aviation soon went missing, with the implication that the Government or agents of other countries abducted them in the interests of security, world peace, etc. Then one day Mr Alfred Butteridge emerged with his heavier than air vehicle, which 'wasn't, one felt, a fresh step forward in the matter so much as a giant stride, a leap' (p21). I wonder if Neil Armstrong arrived at his 'One small step for man one giant leap for mankind' declaration from Wells? Anyway, the Germans attack America with a massive fleet of airships and single pilot Drachenflieger aircraft, before the Butteridge invention can be exploited. Wells portrays the novelty and power of aerial warfare magnificently. The Germans use their craft to attack and bomb American shipping, with devastating results. For instance, Wells describes how, 'one behind the other, a string of a dozen airships dropped with unhurrying swiftness down the air in pursuit of the American fleet. They kept at a height of two thousand feet or more until they were over and a little in advance of the rearmost ironclad, and then stooped swiftly down into a fountain of bullets, and going just a little faster than the ship below, pelted her thinly protected decks with bombs until they became sheets of detonating flame' (PII3-II4). Later the same craft bomb New York with the same grotesque impact. However, Wells shows how the bombardment of New York is a hollow victory because the Germans cannot control the activities of the people who had surrendered to them. Without the back-up of occupying troops there is nothing more than an uneasy stalemate. Secondly, he shows how hard it is for aerial craft to fight each other (though he does depict an aerial dog fight on pages I75 to I82), thus causing attack and counter-attack on the hapless ground-based civilian populations of the protagonists. Thirdly, he points out how battle 'fronts' are eliminated by aerial warfare techniques, making such combat 'enormously destructive and entirely indecisive' (pI65). This combination of qualities made Wells conclude that aerial warfare was inevitably a catalyst for social disintegration and eventually, degeneration. The power of the aerial contraptions is clearly over-stated, and the role of aircraft in the Ist World War was minute compared to the gigantic worries of the pre-war consciousness fed by the writings of Wells and other less intellectual 'panic' writers. Considering the fact that he wrote 'The War In The Air' in 1907, Wells was correct in much of his analysis, but instead of the aircraft we might view the nuclear 'deterrent' as the instrument for the creation of the ultimate disaster. Considering the date of publication of this work, and the eminence of its author and the world events which caused him to write it, we must be aware that it could well have prepared the ground for a spontaneous public reaction, such as the British 1909 phantom 'airship' scare and similar panics during that period. Try to obtain a copy of 'The War In The Air' and enjoy the revelation of the impending doom waiting for us portrayed by a master story teller, and compare it to the doom laden worries of our present day UFO contactees. Any comments to: N. Watson, Westfield Cottage, Crowle Bank Road, Althorpe, South Humberside, DN17 3HZ.