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War and Literature

Before the industrial revolution writers described imaginary societies as a way of criticising their own. The genre was named after the visionary polis conceived by the 16th-century statesman and writer, Thomas More. His Utopians loathed war and never fought except when they were attacked or their citizens and others were mistreated overseas. They tried to deter attack by forcing their defeated enemies to pay the entire costs of any war over a very long period so that they would be dependent and the Utopians better prepared for another conflict. They preferred deceit to battle and were happy to subsidise attempts to assassinate foreign leaders whom they held responsible for aggression. The Utopians concentrated in battle on attacking enemy commanders and they used mercenaries, whenever possible, because they valued their own citizens' lives so highly. It was not that More was necessarily advocating this unchivalrous behaviour but he was asking his countrymen to think about their own security policy and to consider whether other policies might be preferable.¹ Dean Swift turned to satire 150 years later to disparage international politics and warfare. To ridicule the causes for which rulers fought in the 18th century, he had his heroic traveller Gulliver discover the Lilliputians who fought with the inhabitants of Blefuscu over which end of a boiled egg should be opened. Later Gulliver was thrown out of the kingdom of the Houyhnhnms when he shocked their sensibilities by telling them how Europeans admired soldiers and successful wars.²

A new genre began when the pace of social and economic change increased with the industrial revolution. Commentators became more concerned about the way the society was developing and the future threats this posed than about existing failings. As far as warfare was concerned, they worried about the increasing destructiveness of weapons,

a widespread concern reflected in the first modern arms control agreement, the St Petersburg Declaration which prohibited the use of exploding bullets in 1868 and in the two Hague Peace Conferences of 1899 and 1907. Fictional depictions of future wars are inevitably more visionary than those by armchair strategists, politicians or military officers; novelists and poets can look at the changes in military technology or society happening today and they can extrapolate these just as their imagination directs. Naturally, the vast majority of these extrapolations prove inaccurate but, at their best, they have been surprisingly prescient because of the authors' insights both into human nature and their own times. Moreover, novelists and film-makers can show how such imaginary wars effect ordinary families, and their work may be read or watched by millions, so their predictions can have far more impact on public opinion than the more cautious or less imaginative prognostications by armchair strategists, military officers or scientists. Fiction can thus drive the debate about policy and even influence policy itself.

After the beginning of the Industrial Revolution, there were four stages in the development of this fictional contribution to the debate on warfare; the first, which lasted until the 1880s, was characterised by attempt by poets and novelists to describe the industrial warfare waged in the Crimea or in the American Civil War and to predict how it would develop; during the second from 1880 to 1914, numerous novels and plays were published about the alleged threat to Britain from possible French and German 'plans' to invade Britain, and novelists began to dream up 'super weapons' which might either bring warfare to an end or destroy humanity; in the third, after the First World War writers struggled to describe trench warfare and to forecast how civil society would survive the effects of bomb destruction as aircraft grew ever more powerful. The fourth, during the Cold War, was characterised by gloomy depictions of the prospects for a world poised between the threat of an all-consuming nuclear war and a drab, murderous communist takeover. All were didactic; the participants in the first phase asked British people to think about industrialised warfare and how its destructive impact could be minimised; in the second, they were called upon to 'pull themselves together' to face the threat of invasion; in the third, they were warned about the prospects of another, even more destructive war; and in the fourth, they were torn between the two appalling evils of communist invasion or obliteration.

In the 1840s the romantic hero of Alfred Tennyson's poem 'Locksley Hall' foresaw the possibilities of extensive airborne trade, and aerial and

chemical wars, in reaction to which a world federation would grow and become so strong that it could 'hold a fretful realm in awe and [let] the kindly earth slumber, lapt in universal law'.³ Tennyson's path-breaking work was welcomed by the aged Duke of Wellington and it was widely read by Victorian school children; with its reference to the 'Central Blue' or sky it provided the title of the memoirs of the Chief of the Air Staff Sir John Slessor after the Second World War and it was used by President Truman to try to convince conservative Congressmen to support the embryonic United Nations.⁴ The few stanzas devoted to the future formed, arguably, the most prescient short piece of poetry ever written in English on strategic and political issues.⁵

In 1865 the distinguished art critic John Ruskin examined the role of warfare in a famous lecture he gave at the Royal Military Academy in Woolwich when the brutality of the US Civil War was uppermost in men's minds. Ruskin first won the sympathy of his audience by asserting that 'all the pure and noble arts of peace are founded on war; no great art ever yet rose on earth, but among a nation of soldiers'. The critic claimed, equally tendentiously, that 'all healthy men like fighting, and like the sense of danger; all brave women like to hear of their fighting'. Just as the American philosopher William James was to do half a century later, he speculated on whether these instincts could be sublimated in competitive sports but, in the end, he found sporting events wanting because they lacked nobility and were not tests to the death. However, he then went on to circumscribe ever more closely what he meant by such a test, it should, for example, not be decided by 'which of the combatants has the longest gun... or which has the gunpowder made by the best chemists, or iron smelted with the best coal'. What Ruskin admired was a duel or joust between equally well-armed, professional volunteers who would confine their contest geographically and so not wreak havoc on the homes of the poor and vulnerable. The analogy with the Medieval joust was all the stronger because of the emphasis which Ruskin put on chivalry, and charity towards the weak and the vanquished.⁶ Ruskin's was a reasonable but impractical protest against the mechanisation which had already become evident in the Crimea and which was to revolutionise warfare over the next half century.

The scaremongering literature on warfare published in the decades leading up the First World War has been dissected by I. F. Clarke in his classic study *Voices Prophesying War*.⁷ Clarke dates this genre from 1871, when Sir George Chesney anonymously published *The Battle of Dorking* describing a German army suddenly landing and smashing the flimsy

barrier of Volunteers the British had managed to mobilise against them. Chesney's story was followed by dozens of plays and novels on the same theme. He had succeeded in focusing the British defence debate for the next four decades on whether the Royal Navy was sufficiently strong to protect the country from invasion and whether, if not, Britain needed to follow the continental lead and build up an army numbering millions of men by introducing conscription.

This late 19th-century international rivalry provided the background to the works by the leading imperial poet Rudyard Kipling and by the pre-eminent British writer of science fiction H. G. Wells. Kipling defended the ordinary soldier against the prejudices common amongst civilians and lauded the courage which he and his Indian, African and Boer enemies showed on imperial battlefields from Kabul to Ladysmith.⁸ He romanticised this type of war which he believed was necessary to 'veil the threat of terror and check the show of pride' amongst the conquered peoples. But the death of his only son in the trenches of Flanders in 1915 shook him out of the romantic view of war and transformed his image of the world. Both his stories and poetry became ever more pessimistic.⁹ The distinguished American literary critic Edmund Wilson argued that the 1920s saw some of Kipling's finest stories but they were so 'full of inescapable illness' and gloom that they were 'the Kipling that nobody read'. As Wilson put it, 'the big talk of the world, of the mission to command of the British, even the hateful fear and disappointment, have largely faded away for Kipling. He composes as a memorial to his son.'¹⁰

If Kipling's pre-1914 poems and stories epitomised the romantic view of the British Empire, Wells was closer to the fictional tradition emerging in the United States which envisaged Americans inventing weapons so destructive that Washington could impose peace on the rest of the world. Professor Bruce Franklin has pointed out that the future President Harry Truman not only remembered Tennyson's forecasts but also continued to read this type of literature up until the time that he became president. He also argued that it might have influenced the President's decision to use the atomic bombs in the hope that they would cause a revulsion against warfare and give him the power to change international politics, as the optimistic school of US science fiction writers had been arguing since the late 19th century.¹¹

Wells' story about nuclear warfare, *A World Set Free*, envisaged the new weapons causing massive destruction and shocking rulers into cooperating together to form a world government with the right of onsite inspection to ensure that all nuclear forces were abolished. His

other stories forecast the aerial wars of the future and the invention of 'tanks' more than a decade before they actually appeared.¹² 'The land ironclads', his story of tank warfare, was also a meditation on Social Darwinism, suggesting that the cleverer townfolk would be able, in the end, to outwit the braver countrymen. Wells was associated with the group of Coefficients, founded by Sidney and Beatrice Webb, who saw Britain as an amateur nation threatened by the military and economic competition of the more professional Germans.¹³ Like Kipling's, his mood was transformed by the carnage of trench warfare in the First World War. He tried in his wartime novel, *Mr Britling Sees it Through*, to show how the national mood was changing.¹⁴ He devoted himself after the war to appealing for support for the League of Nations and warning against the threat which conflict presented to civilisation itself. Now he blamed nationalism for the world's ills though he continued to be deeply and overtly patriotic.

Roland Stromberg, who analysed the reaction of writers and intellectuals to the outbreak of war in 1914, noted how often they welcomed the break from bourgeois, commercial life and relished the unity which war appeared to bring to their divided communities. Even if their view of imperialism was very different, both Wells and Kipling briefly joined in this prevalent mood. It was the swansong of military romanticism amongst the Western literary community. Tennyson and Ruskin had felt attracted by the romanticism of war but, for them, there had always been a strong contrary pull which led Tennyson to advise his countrymen to pause before they went to war and to work towards 'a warless world, a single race, a single tongue'.¹⁵ Wells and Kipling had been swept up by the international rivalry of the years before the outbreak of war in 1914; Stromberg does not argue that they and their contemporaries influenced the decisions statesmen took leading to war but it seems reasonable to believe that there would have been more hesitation amongst politicians in 1914 if Social Darwinism had not been so prevalent amongst the European elite.

It was the writers who had actually served in the First World War who subsequently dominated Western consciousness and shaped the vision of future wars. Contrary to the conventional wisdom, the military historian, Brian Bond has pointed out that the majority of them did not believe that their courage and sacrifice had been wasted. Middlebrow authors, such as Ernest Raymond and Frederic Manning, were both the most popular and the most supportive of British intervention in the conflict.¹⁶ But the trenches and the massive artillery barrages were a far cry from Ruskin's chivalrous duel. Memoirs, poems and novels described

the mud and squalor, the chance nature of the killing and maiming and the vast anonymous numbers involved in industrial warfare.¹⁷ People now had a much clearer view of what war meant to soldiers than their ancestors had when they tried to understand the French Wars. All this tended to obscure Allied military achievements and the reasons for going to Belgium's defence and preserving the balance of power in 1914.¹⁸

It was hardly surprising then that intellectuals frequently followed Wells' lead and looked to the League of Nations to avoid another conflict. When this hope waned in the early 1930s, novelists speculated about the coming conflict and particularly about the impact which bombing would have. Wells' most original contribution came in his loose and baggy 'novel' *The Shape of Things To Come* published in 1933 and through the subsequent film version which was more disciplined and succinct than the book itself.¹⁹ By 1933 Japan had already invaded Manchuria and Wells had the prescience to see that they would then go on to invade the rest of China, that the Chinese would use guerrilla tactics to resist them effectively, that the Western Powers would supply the Chinese with arms and that, eventually, the United States would be drawn into the war. At the same time, he correctly suggested that war would break out in Europe between Germany and Poland, though he was wrong to predict Anglo-French neutrality in that conflict and, above all, about his central prediction that economic dislocation and disease, together with the European and Asian wars, would bring about the collapse of the state.

Civilisation, Wells believed, would subsequently be restored by the aviation industry, which would sweep away the old divisions of nation and race.²⁰ This might seem wildly eccentric and it was satirised by *The Times'* film critic who commented, 'quite suddenly the airmen – presumably the same people who caused so much damage in the Second World War – emerge from the ruins endowed with such wisdom, detachment and nobility as would put Socrates to shame'.²¹ But ideas about internationalising aircraft and air travel, as a way of preventing aerial aggression, were not unusual in the 1930s and were even proposed by the French government. Thus Wells' vision that cooperation would grow from economic necessity rather than be created from the top, as the League of Nations had attempted, was not so eccentric; he had stumbled across the functional theory of international integration more than a decade before it inspired the work of Jean Monnet and other statesmen who founded the European Economic Community.

Wells brought his considerable powers of imagination to bear on the threats to civilisation in the 1930s, Nevil Shute brought his experience of aircraft design and his considerable ability as a story-teller to analyse the effects of the most feared of the new weapons, the strategic bomber. In *What Happened to the Corbetts* he forecast in 1939 that German bombing could devastate a town like Southampton but that such attacks would be politically counter-productive for those who launched them. He has his French commentator say to his British friends after such a raid:

You hold the seas. The aeroplanes, they can do nothing but destroy your homes, blindly. They have not been able to destroy your ships. They have not hit your arsenals or factories except by chance. ... Only a nation of no understanding, who did not know the world psychology, would make such mistakes. Very nearly have they brought in America to fight beside England. ... Every day the ships come from America, loaded with men, and money, and food. ... England will now win the war.²²

Shute was right about the inaccuracy of bombing and that bombing towns would increase US sympathy for the states under attack but wrong to assume that this anger would be enough on its own to bring Washington into the war.

When, during the Second World War, the bombing raids, the holocaust and other massacres confirmed the depth of the ideas, values and passions dividing mankind and the increasing destructiveness of technology, the prospects seemed ever bleaker. Western society was threatened after 1945 by the nightmarish horrors of a repressive communism graphically described in George Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four*²³ and the nuclear destruction symbolised by Nevil Shute's pessimistic best-seller *On the Beach*. *Nineteen Eighty-Four* was published in 1949, the year before Orwell's death. He envisaged Britain renamed 'Airstrip One' with complete state control of all the media, with an omnipresent dictator, Big Brother who had total oversight of all lives through cameras located in their rooms and with the obliteration of history and suspect political words to prevent people even thinking of rebellion against the government. Airstrip One is part of the Oceania alliance and involved in interminable and futile warfare against Eurasia, which can never be brought to a conclusion because of deterrence, but which brutalises all involved who are taught to worship weaponry and gloat over films of the death of their adversaries. The wars had no objective except to use

up the resources which would otherwise have made people richer and thus encouraged them to take power into their own hands.²⁴ Orwell was far too pessimistic. In contrast to his predictions, despite recurrent crises nuclear weapons were not used during the Cold War and, to the horror of those who doubted the efficacy of deterrence, they encouraged governments to reduce their military spending in the expectation that no Great Power would attack a state armed with such destructive power. But Orwell was correct to discern that, as people became wealthier, they would insist on exerting more power over governments and that society would become less deferential and hierarchical. Yet, we can see now that politicians had no alternative, failure to meet the material expectations of the people was ultimately fatal to the communist system, even if increasing wealth would have brought about its demise by another route.

In Shute's even more pessimistic nightmare a nuclear holocaust obliterating all life on the planet was triggered by an Egyptian attack on the United States, which Washington incorrectly assumed was a Soviet offensive against the West. When the West responded by attacking Moscow, the Chinese took the opportunity to bomb their communist colleagues with highly radioactive cobalt weapons to depopulate their cities and allow their own people to expand. Subsequently the inhabitants of Melbourne in Australia waited transfixed as the fatal radioactive tide gradually spread southwards across the planet. Some tried to drown their sorrows in alcohol, others coped with the looming catastrophe by continuing to speak as though they needed to plant for the coming Spring or to prepare for their children's wedding, and yet others turned to dangerous sports such as motor racing. *On the Beach* ends with the heroine watching the last surviving US submarine leave harbour to sink itself as the radiation intensified, while she herself committed suicide with poison.²⁵

Although there were numerous novels and short stories about the aftermath of a nuclear catastrophe, there is no doubt about the impact on Western public opinion of Shute's novel and the popular film which followed. The American paperback edition carried claims by the reviewer in *The Philadelphia Inquirer* that it was 'the most talked-about bestseller in years! Explosive... shattering... Sensational – should be read by the world'. Senator Stuart Symington, a former secretary of the US Air Force, suggested that 'every American should read' the book, advice supported by the critic on *The Washington Post and Times Herald* which called it 'the most important and dramatic novel of the atomic age. If you read only one book a year, this should be the one.'²⁶ It was in vain that the

US nuclear physicist Edward Teller argued that Shute had his science wrong. As he wrote later:

Nevil Shute's novel *On the Beach*, although it was based on a huge overestimate of the damage done by residual radioactivity from a nuclear war and dramatised the fate of the last human survivors, gained a wide readership, was converted into a movie, and had immense and far-reaching effects.²⁷

Of course, by no means everyone shared in the gloom, expressed in different ways by Orwell and Shute. Indeed, from the very beginning of the nuclear age the majority hoped that the development of nuclear weapons would make a world war less likely; the percentage of the British and Americans believing that nuclear weapons had increased the likelihood of war was in the low teens in late 1945 against 50 per cent who believed the reverse.²⁸ However, fears undoubtedly grew when the Soviets developed their own nuclear forces and the Cold War intensified. Furthermore, while deterrence may have reduced the prospects for war, there was general awareness that it remained a possibility. Now that the archives are largely open on both sides, we can see that there were frequent misunderstandings and some could have led to conflict even though governments were only too well aware of the potential consequences.²⁹ What is remarkable is how, after living with the nuclear threat for some decades, the Europeans became more optimistic than the American public; through the 1980s half of all Americans believed that there was a 50 per cent chance of a world war breaking out over the next decade, compared with between 18 and 29 per cent of Britons and the same proportion of Germans.³⁰ The US media, armchair strategists and politicians put more emphasis on the dangers than their European counterparts, possibly, in part, because the United States had previously been so shielded from outside attack. Despite, or because of, Europe's devastating experiences in the 20th century, its inhabitants perhaps found it impossible to live with the idea that they might be the focus of a nuclear disaster even more horrific than the World Wars.

Novelists and film makers often influenced the general security debate, though they sometimes had a direct effect on government policy. Wells had contacts with government ministers but was frustrated by his inability to make the system more responsive to his ideas. Shute's account of the Corbett family's experiences simply added to the existing fears of air attack prevalent in Britain in the 1930s; fears which,

admittedly, made sure that the government would provide the population with gas masks and encouraged it to evacuate women and children from the cities when war broke out. Truman may have been influenced by his reading of poetry and fiction, and Orwell's vision of totalitarianism certainly increased the general anxiety about Soviet tyranny because he appeared to show how it might destroy civil society and 'brainwash' the public. However, it was the Berlin blockade by Eastern forces which ensured that the Western allies would form an alliance and the Korean War from 1950 to 1953 which, in turn, led to substantial growth in Western defence spending.

Nor did Western governments abandon their nuclear weapons because of Shute's apocalyptic vision, though the nuclear threat lurked at the back of many minds, hence the rise of Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament (CND) and the general commitment to negotiating arms control measures. Igor Korchilov, the Soviet translator, who was present when the INF Treaty limiting European nuclear forces was signed in Washington on 8 December 1987, recalled afterwards:

I looked round and saw tears glistening on the cheeks of some of the most famous faces in the room, but these faces were mainly American, not Soviet. Most of the Soviets I saw remained silent, as if trying to understand exactly what was taking place. It was all very moving.... For a moment it seemed the symbol of bright hopes for the future.³¹

If such emotions propelled arms control negotiations between Moscow and Washington, as Truman hoped would be the case, it seems possible that there was more than a coincidence between the publication of Shute's book in 1957 suggesting that an Egyptian nuclear attack could unleash a catastrophic nuclear war and the Irish government's decision the following year to launch the initiative at the UN which eventually resulted in the signature of the nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty to stop the spread of nuclear weapons. In 1959 the Irish foreign minister warned the UN in words redolent with Shute's nightmare:

No one can calculate in advance the interplay of forces if country after country, revolutionary group after revolutionary group became possessed, secretly or openly, of nuclear weapons.... The dangers involved in wider dissemination include... accidental atomic war, demagogic atomic war, and nuclear blackmail.... I greatly fear we are now on the edge of a slippery slope: that before long, if we do not

check this disastrous progress, the momentum acquired will be such that it will be beyond any human power to halt the increasingly rapid descent towards destruction.³²

Admittedly Frank Aiken, the foreign minister, chose to quote a report on proliferation summarised in *Daedalus: The Journal of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences* rather than Shute's book in support of his initiative but one can be sure that Shute had done vastly more to create the general atmosphere prevailing at the UN on 13 November 1959, than Howard Simons' article in that prestigious journal.³³ Aiken's reference to the dangers of revolutionary groups acquiring nuclear weapons was his personal contribution to the debate; as a former member of the IRA, he was, no doubt, well aware of the fevered emotions which can determine such groups' behaviour.

What we can say is that deterrence between the Great Powers was more robust during the Cold War than Shute feared and that its strength was much aided by technology. Egypt could not have used ballistic missiles against the United States, or indeed any other states, without its responsibility for the attack becoming known. China could not have hoped to attack the Soviet Union without a devastating response from that state, and Beijing would have been most unlikely to drop nuclear weapons on the Russians so that it could colonise Soviet territory, given that this would poison the land it hoped to conquer. There was always a danger during the Cold War that some miscalculation could lead to utter disaster but much was done to minimise such mistakes – missiles were put underground or sent to sea, so that no nation could easily attack them. Communications between the nuclear weapon states were improved to prevent misjudgements, and constant efforts were made to stabilise the arms race through arms control negotiations.

Nevertheless, the nightmares outlined by Shute and Orwell formed part of the mental baggage of a whole generation. Theirs' was the fiction of total unremitting despair without the slightest chink of light or hope for humanity. The British literary elite had travelled very far from the idealism of Tennyson's Locksley Hall, through the catastrophe of the First World War to the nightmare of the Cold War years. The general view of human nature was far gloomier than it had been in the 19th century. William Golding, the first British novelist to win the Nobel Prize for Literature after the Second World War, epitomised this change. Most of his novels explored the causes of men's cruelty; in *Lord of the Flies*, he overturned the romantic 19th-century image of the honourable schoolboy and demonstrated how children were only

held back from murdering each other by adult influence; similarly, in *The Spire* he showed how religious obsessions could lead to megalomania and in *Free Fall* and *Pincher Martin* the way in which sexual drives blinded people to their impact on others. It was not surprising that an age with such a pessimistic view of humanity should rely on the threat of mass destruction to preserve peace. Nevertheless, when the gloomy prognostications of nuclear war and communist success proved equally unfounded and the Soviet empire collapsed, the political pendulum swung again towards optimism.³⁴ And with this new optimism came the new wave of Western interventionism which we shall examine in Chapter 10.