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Past, Present, and Future on the 'Human Island': H. G. Wells's *Mr Blettsworthy on Rampole Island*

As John Donne wrote, 'No man is an *Iland*, intire of it selfe; every man is a peece of the *Continent*, a part of the *maine*';¹ and islands themselves are not entire and self-sufficient in Donne's sense, despite their pinpoint status on maps of the globe. Geographically speaking, the existence of islands is manifest, but in human and in biological terms island status is relative rather than absolute. The ecology of islands depends upon the seas surrounding them and upon their proximity to other landmasses, while logically the concept of an island demands a mainland if it is to make any sense. Semantically and etymologically the word island is indissolubly linked to the ideas of *isolation* and *insulation*, but these can only be defined in relation to their opposites: communication, contamination, and so on. Another semantic peculiarity is that in Latin and all Romance languages the opposition between island and mainland is complicated by an in-between state, the peninsula or *presqu'île*, the almost-island. Thus Robinson Crusoe has to sail all round his island in order to be absolutely certain that it is an island. At least one fictional hero, David Balfour in Robert Louis Stevenson's *Kidnapped* (1886), thinks he is marooned on a desert island only to discover that it becomes a peninsula at low tide.

The peninsula or *presqu'île* is one kind of intermediate, or doubtful, island; and I shall name at least two others, the 'lost' island and the utopian (or dystopian) island. In this paper I shall discuss H. G. Wells as

¹ John Donne, 'Meditations xvii', in Donne, *Complete Poetry and Selected Prose*, ed. John Hayward (London: Nonesuch, 1962), p. 538.

a creator of lost dystopian islands, the most famous of which is of course Dr Moreau's island. But I shall focus on a later Wellsian text which has a particular interest for us on the present occasion since the main character, Arnold Blettsworthy, is born on Madeira of partly Madeiran descent. *Mr Blettsworthy on Rampole Island*, first published in 1928, has been viewed as a revision of *The Island of Doctor Moreau* (1896) and also of *The Time Machine* (1895). Before coming to Wells, however, I shall touch on some aspects of lost and utopian islands, and I shall also look at Charles Darwin's influence on our modern understanding of islands.

The most famous of all lost islands is not, in fact, a sunken island but a sunken continent: the lost empire of Atlantis, described in Plato's dialogues 'Timaeus' and 'Critias'. Atlantis was an immensely powerful kingdom with a metropolis even more splendid than Plato's Athens, but the story of Atlantis is one of a catastrophic fall, first political and then geographical. Plato tells how Atlantis, once a rich and peaceful civilisation, embarked on a ruinous policy of imperial conquest which ended with it making war on the Greeks. Hubris led to nemesis, the latter taking a physical shape with the onset of violent earthquakes and floods, so that the continent itself disappeared into the sea.² (Many people have speculated that some of the North Atlantic islands, including Madeira, are all that is left of Atlantis.) The Atlantis myth has a significant presence in modern literature, especially in science fiction between 1885 and 1930,³ which was the period of Wells's fiction although he himself does not apparently make use of it. Instead, he was fixated on a second Platonic image, that of the utopian Republic.⁴

Atlantis according to Plato was once a real place, but his Republic is merely hypothetical. The Greek experience was one of city-states,

² See *The Dialogues of Plato, Volume 3: Timaeus and Other Dialogues*, trans. Benjamin Jowett, ed. R. M. Hare and D. A. Russell (London: Sphere, 1970), esp. pp. 231, 306-14.

³ See John Clute and Peter Nicholls, eds., *The Encyclopedia of Science Fiction* (New York: St Martin's, 1995), p. 68.

⁴ See for example Tom Miller, 'Wells's Mythological republic', *H. G. Wells Newsletter* 5: 11 (Summer 2006), pp. 4-7.

so that the Republic is an imaginary city; but in Renaissance Europe the discovery of 'new worlds' across the seas made it inevitable for the utopian location to be figured as a hitherto unknown island, as part of the new maritime geography that was becoming known to European sailors. The Renaissance Utopia's 'offshore' status is further emphasized by the fact that, in Thomas More's work, the location is strictly speaking an almost-island since it has been artificially cut off from the mainland. The utopian islands of More's Utopia and Bacon's New Atlantis are also lost islands in the sense that no one, with the exception of the narrators of these works, has ever visited them.⁵

The whole point of the fiction of lost, utopian islands is to record their difference from the 'mainlands' known to their readers. The island thus becomes a laboratory of human social organisation, and also a kind of museum. It embodies a history of separate development, which may either be a model for the future or an illustration of the direction that humanity as whole might have, but has not, taken. It may be a blueprint or a conceptual dead end. The result of Charles Darwin's visit to the Galapagos Islands in 1835 was to extend this way of understanding the 'utopian' island--as laboratory, as museum, and as evolutionary paradigm--to all islands. Of course, it may be said that these aspects of island difference were largely known before Darwin, and certainly he did not need to go to the Galapagos to find them out, even as a naturalist.⁶ But the voyage of the *Beagle* made the general and evolutionary aspects of island difference inescapable. We would expect H. G. Wells, one of the first writers to emerge from within the Darwinian milieu (he was

⁵ Contrast Robinson Crusoe's island, which becomes a landing-place for tribes of cannibals, for various subsequent European castaways, and, in the volume of Crusoe's Farther Adventures, for the returning Robinson Crusoe himself. Defoe does everything he can do within the bounds of fiction to make Crusoe's island appear real and substantial; More and Bacon, like Plato with his Republic, clearly expect us to regard their islands as being merely allegorical features of the new maritime world.

⁶ For example, instead of studying the Galapagos finches Darwin could have looked at the separate sub-species of the European wren, trogloodytes trogloodytes, to be found on the North Atlantic islands of St Kilda, the Hebrides, Fair Isle, Shetland, and the Faroe Islands.

born in 1866 and took a B.Sc in Zoology in 1890), to incorporate the Darwinian island into his view of the human condition, and he does this in *The Island of Doctor Moreau*, in a few of his early short stories, and later in *Mr Blettsworthy on Rampole Island*. As in Darwin's evolutionary theory, island difference becomes the basis of a universal allegory of biological nature.

I have said that the story of Atlantis is the story of a fall from an original, near-perfect state. But More's and, still more, Bacon's utopian islands imply the ideas of progress and the perfectibility of human society, while the Darwinian evolutionary outlook is torn between the alternatives of progress and decline. One of the principal lessons of Darwinism is that of the spectacular cost and wastefulness of evolutionary developments such as those that have made human civilisation possible. This lesson from natural history was adapted to human history in a highly popular late nineteenth-century work, Winwood Reade's *The Martyrdom of Man* (1872), which helps to form the outlook of Wells's *Mr Blettsworthy*. As Blettsworthy reflects, 'Ten thousand pollen grains blow to waste for one that reaches a pistil; why should man be an exception to the common way of life?'⁷

The name Blettsworthy may be understood as meaning 'worthy to be blessed'; it implies that human perfectibility is possible. But Wells dedicated his novel of 1928 to the 'Immortal Memory of Candide', suggesting that the belief in evolutionary perfectibility may simply be another deluded version of the Panglossian Enlightenment faith that all is for the best in the best of all possible worlds. This is where the island symbolism of Wells's novel comes to the fore, since there are in fact three islands in *Mr Blettsworthy on Rampole Island*, Madeira, England, and Rampole Island, each occupying a different position in the debate about human perfectibility. Blettsworthy, nurtured in Madeira and England, experiences life as a castaway on Rampole Island in the South Atlantic shortly before the First World War, a fact which puts Wells's novel right at the end of the 'undiscovered island' tradition. It was during the 1920s and 1930s that the age of sea travel was succeeded

⁷ H. G. Wells, *Mr Blettsworthy on Rampole Island* (London: Ernest Benn, 1928), p. 124. Subsequent page references in the text are to this edition.

by the beginnings of the age of air travel, which not only changed the notion of the castaway but made the whole idea of the 'lost island' less plausible. Some 'lost island' novels would still be written, but their human visitors, as in William Golding's *Lord of the Flies* (1954) and Muriel Spark's *Robinson* (1958), tend to be survivors of plane crashes rather than shipwrecks. Wells, however, adopts a different solution to the growing implausibility of the lost island. By a cunning sleight of hand he first convinces us of the reality of Rampole Island, and then reveals that it is a mere hallucination, a sign of Blettsworthy's dementia and part of his defence-mechanism against the full horrors of modern mainland life. His retreat to a mental island at once mirrors the realities of a Europe blundering towards a catastrophic war, and insulates him against those realities.

Blettsworthy is born on Madeira to a mother 'of mixed Portuguese and Syrian origin, with a touch of the indigenous blood of Madeira' (10). She dies when he is five and, says our narrator, 'my few memories of her are hopelessly confused with a tornado that ravaged the island' (11). Madeira is the land of tropical storms and tempests, just as the England to which the five-year-old Blettsworthy is taken is the land of calm. Similarly, Madeira is Catholic and female where England is Protestant and male. It is Blettsworthy's English uncle Rupert, an Anglican clergyman, who serves as the novel's Dr Pangloss, since he is the intellectual representative of nineteenth-century English liberalism with its faith in human perfectibility. But Rupert Blettsworthy dies and his nephew is cheated out of his inheritance and goes on a long sea voyage in which he witnesses scenes of brutality, mutiny, and shipwreck before being set adrift in the South Atlantic and left to die. He survives but, as we later learn, becomes insane. Five years later he comes out of his dementia in a psychiatric clinic in New York, having spent the intervening time (so he thinks) on Rampole Island among prehistoric beasts and primordial savages.

The disclosure that Rampole Island is a hallucination has been carefully prepared for by Wells, though it is very cleverly hidden from the reader. Ultimately we learn that the demented Blettsworthy was found drifting in the South Atlantic and rescued by the crew of an American survey ship, who put in for a few hours at Rampole Island--described

as a 'bleak desert' (221) off the coast of Patagonia--before taking him back to New York. But Blettsworthy believes he has been picked up by savages in a rowing boat and taken to their island, whose harbour is guarded by a 'rock in the shape of a woman with staring eyes and an open mouth', with a 'splintered pinnacle . . . like an upraised arm and hand brandishing a club' (138); this, he is told, is the 'Great Goddess welcoming her slaves'. Not only is the rock of the Great Goddess an ironic distortion of the Statue of Liberty, which the survey ship must have passed as it entered New York harbour, but Blettsworthy's life in a savage village in a deep gorge between overtowering cliffs on Rampole Island is a transformation of his life in the streets of Manhattan. (Occasionally, indeed, his deep reverie of Rampole Island is penetrated by the sounds of city traffic.) Blettsworthy believes he has been adopted as the Sacred Lunatic of the primitive tribe, whose chief, a brutal warrior called Ardam (a name suggesting the primordial Adam), is preparing to make war on a neighbouring village.

The meaning of this imaginary island has to be unravelled by the recovering Blettsworthy, aided by his New York psychiatrist Dr Minchett. Superficially Rampole Island is a transformation of New York City, but at a deeper level Blettsworthy's hallucinations arise out of the trauma caused by the destruction of his Panglossian progressivist faith, which (as we have seen) is a product of his English Protestant upbringing. It is Dr Minchett who notes that the sub-tropical landscape of Blettsworthy's lost island, so different from the bare rocks of the real Rampole Island, can only come from repressed memories of his patient's Madeiran childhood. (The island of Blettsworthy's experience is sub-tropical, whereas the real Rampole Island is Patagonian.) Added to this is the brutality of the ship's captain and crew who eventually cut him adrift: it is Blettsworthy's terror of these men that transforms the Captain into Ardam the warrior chief. Moreover, Blettsworthy as a child of the late nineteenth century identifies 'savagery' with tribal warfare and cannibalism, and regards the lives of modern primitive peoples as a survival from humanity's prehistoric past. In one of the novel's most resonant images, he finds that his island is inhabited not only by savage cannibals but by a remnant of the terrifying primordial beasts that once stalked South America, the Giant Megatheria.

If these are the raw materials of Blettsworthy's Rampole Island experience, what does that experience mean? One difficulty in answering this question arises from the nature of Blettsworthy's narrative, which is not only interpretative and retrospective but is written at a considerable distance from the supposed experience. He regains his sanity in the United States at the outbreak of the First World War. As a British citizen he is liable to conscription into the British forces, so he returns to England, undergoes army training, and is sent to the Front, where he is badly wounded. His story, told in the post-war period, is inevitably overlaid with memories of the war. For example, the brutal military training that he undergoes becomes mixed up with his earlier suffering, leading him to observe in retrospect that 'I cannot be sure how far my conception of Ardam is due to that life of insult and humiliation' (238). Prediction and retrospect have become confused when, eventually, he comes to write the narrative of his adventures. To the extent that these adventures constitute a hallucination or dream experience, we should remember that in Freudian psychoanalysis it is not the dream itself, which cannot be recovered, but the patient's explicit memories of the dream that constitute the material to be analysed. Blettsworthy's account of his Rampole Island experience is similarly written up from memory, and this is one of several features of the novel which suggest Wells's familiarity with, and interest in, some of the basic concepts of early psychoanalysis.⁸

To a certain extent it is possible to view *Mr Blettsworthy on Rampole Island* through a Freudian lens, with the England of Blettsworthy's childhood representing the Panglossian world of the Superego, while Madeira and, still more, Rampole represent the Id, the world of the Unconscious. (Wells himself does not use this terminology, but he describes the Anglican God of Blettsworthy's Uncle Rupert as a 'super-Blettsworthy' in control of the universe (19), a phrase

⁸ Dr Minchett, the psychiatrist in *Mr Blettsworthy*, is one of several Wellsian characters with interests in clinical psychology and psychoanalysis. An earlier example is Dr Martineau in *The Secret Places of the Heart* (1922). In his *Experiment in Autobiography* (1934) Wells offers a Jungian analysis of his 'persona'. Later Wells was one of the principal subscribers to a fund to mark Freud's 80th birthday.

which could clearly suggest the Superego.) As for Rampole Island, Blettsworthy explains his position as Sacred Lunatic with reference to the contemporary anthropological debates summarized by a member of the ‘Smithsonian Institution of Washington’ in an article on ‘The Eccentric Individual in Primitive Society’. Here, as Blettsworthy puts it, ‘The writer connects the Sacred Lunatics of Patagonia – for it seems they are known on the mainland also – with the widespread worship of sacrificial kings, and so shakes down a mass of ripe and rotting fruit from [Sir James Frazer’s] *The Golden Bough*’ (187-8).⁹ Since, as Robert M. Philmus has observed, Wells’s novel advances a kind of ‘psychological anthropology’ – replacing the more purely biological view of humanity’s links with the animal kingdom in *The Island of Doctor Moreau*¹⁰ – the author’s depiction of ritual cannibalism may also have been influenced by Freud’s arguments for the universality of primordial cannibalism in *Totem and Taboo* (1913).

Psychoanalysis and psychological anthropology all contribute to Wells’s allegorical presentation of Rampole Island as an epitome of the general human condition, or as he would later write ‘a caricature-portrait of the whole human world’.¹¹ The island, then, represents the mainland: both the mainland of continental Europe before, during, and after the First World War, and the global situation of a humanity which remains in thrall to the warrior leader Ardam, and also in thrall to the Giant Megatheria, which are seen as symbols of the outdated and moribund ‘laws and institutions of mankind’ (172). Is there any escape from this condition, or does it represent not only humanity’s past and present but also its future?

Since Rampole Island is a hallucination, the problem is not one of physically leaving it behind but of exorcising it, of escaping from its memory and its control over the human imagination. Blettsworthy’s (and, by implication, our) need is for a kind of mental therapy, leading

⁹ This article seems likely to be authentic although it has not been traced.

¹⁰ Robert M. Philmus, *Visions and Re-Visions: (Re)constructing Science Fiction* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2005), p. 55.

¹¹ H. G. Wells, *Experiment in Autobiography*, 2 vols. (London: Gollancz and Cresset Press, 1934), ii, p. 501.

towards a return to sanity and a state of mind no longer subject to self-destructive mental obsessions. Rampole Island embodies the diseased mentality of Chit, the tribal soothsayer of whom Blettsworthy says that 'His mind moved within the idea of war, as Kant says our imaginations move within the ideas of space and time. For him war was an inevitable feature of human life, a necessary form of thought. He could not imagine men strongly sane enough to conquer that ancient disposition' (184). Chit's mentality is the mentality of the Great War when, as Blettsworthy again says, 'Rampole Island had indeed now spread out and swallowed all the world' (247). To overcome it is an intellectual rather than a physical task and, in a way that is typical of late Wells, this novel that begins with a narrative of vivid and apparently decisive actions ends with open-ended and deliberately inconclusive philosophical dialogues. Blettsworthy's interlocutor, in these dialogues, is first Dr Minchett and then a figure from his English past, the false friend who had once cheated him out of his Panglossian inheritance but is now a reformed sinner and the spokesman for a revived English liberalism. Will humanity's long martyrdom at last bear fruit in the achievement of a better society? "'Take my word for it,'" says one of Blettsworthy's Panglossian interlocutors in the last words of the novel, "'it is your Rampole Island that will pass away, and I who will come true'" (288); Rampole thus being replaced by a once perfidious, but now repentant and resurrected Albion, a final vision of utopia that seems to strain both Blettsworthy's and the reader's credulity.

Is Blettsworthy really 'worthy to be blessed'? Much as we may wish to believe that the horrors of Rampole Island have finally been submerged, we still need to reckon with the aspect of Blettsworthy's life on a sub-tropical island that was not hallucination, but a primal reality – and this is his infancy on Madeira. The novel's final section detailing what it calls a 'Sanguine Interlude' in recovering, post-war England is both historically illusory – since, twelve years after the novel's publication in 1928, Britain as an island nation would once again be involved in a desperate battle for survival – and deliberately amnesiac. The male, temperate, Protestant mentality of England presupposes its opposite – female, stormy, Catholic Madeira – and both are offshore, insular, and necessarily eccentric versions of the life of

the human mainland. They are laboratories but also museums: possibly evolutionary dead-ends but alternatively, it is to be hoped, evolutionary signposts. Wells's 1928 novel balances different visions of the utopian and dystopian 'human island', reminding us how closely the imaginative form of utopia itself is linked to the symbolism and mentality of islands.