



# Anglotopia and the limits of the white imaginary

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Accepted: 3 February 2023 / Published online: 25 February 2023  
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## Abstract

This is a review of Duncan Bell’s ‘Dreamworld of Race’ that provides a friendly critique of the absence of alternate anti-racist visions, whilst praising the book’s nuanced appraisal of ‘Anglotopia’.

**Keywords** Racism · Liberalism · Dreamworlds

‘The thing about science fiction is that it’s totally wide open. But it’s wide open in a conditional way.’ -Octavia Butler

Octavia Butler’s apprehension of science fiction as “open in a conditional way” is equally applicable to the futures conjured by Duncan Bell’s four main protagonists in his magisterial *Dreamworlds of Race*. Tracking the thought of industrialist Andrew Carnegie, journalist WT Stead, imperialist Cecil J Rhodes, and prolific science fiction author HG Wells, Bell traces the intellectual lineaments of an ambitious project of Anglo-American union, popular with many of the most illustrious figures in the late nineteenth century in the US, but especially in Britain. The specific contours of this project differ, but the substance is remarkably similar—a racial union between Britain and the US, or the Anglo-Saxon races (sometimes referred to less pointedly as the English-speaking races) that exudes goodwill (through weapons, civilization, and often capitalism) and ultimately brings about perpetual peace. An “Anglotopia” if you will.

The first half of the book is an intellectual history of this quartet, most of which is spent delineating the various ways in which each of these men propounded their vision for the Anglo-American race alliance, whilst the latter half shifts tack to focus on some of the core themes that emerged out of the work of Wells, Stead, Carnegie and Rhodes and fin-de-siècle narratives more generally. This part of the book makes a wide-ranging contribution to literary theory (through a close-reading of science fiction), to political thought (through the various forms of union and citizenship promulgated by political elites and writers; most prominently the curiously-phrased

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idea of ‘isopolitan citizenship’ or common citizenship between Britons and Americans) and cultural theory (through an analysis of alternative proposals and futurities articulated in the works of the ‘steampunk’ fiction and Afro-futurism).

Given both the breadth and the depth of intellectual terrain Bell traverses it is impossible in a review to do justice to the multiple, complex, and nuanced arguments that emerge from the text. In what follows, I will focus on what stood out for me whilst reading *Dreamworlds of Race*.

## The characters

Having never heard of William Thomas Stead, I was struck by the 21st Century nature of his fervent liberalism. Bell (2020: 101–102) writes: “Stead supported the suffragettes, Irish Home Rule, social reform, and the peace movement”. In the next sentence he continues “An ardent imperialist and indefatigable celebrant of the ‘English speaking race’ he worked closely with Rhodes [...]”. For much of his life, Stead used his (rather large) platform as a journalist to tirelessly advocate for racial union. He was fanatically devoted to America, arguing that the modern white American man embodied the zenith of human existence. His apparently contradictory support for the suffragettes and for Irish Home Rule on the one hand, and his love for Cecil Rhodes, bloodthirsty imperialist and unreconstituted bigot on the other hand is almost prescient in its liberalism. In the present moment, some of the most fervid racists in both the US and the UK are (or at least purport to be) dedicated feminists. Stead embodied the hypocrisy of liberalism before it became *de rigeur*. HG Wells, likewise, presents a contradiction: an anti-imperialist, and a thought-provoking socialist, Wells nevertheless believed his ideal society would be best realised by the merging of the US and the British colonial empire along the colour line: “A great federation of white English-speaking peoples” was both probable and desirable on Wells’ account (Bell 2020: 159). His ideas and political subjectivity chimes with much of the politics of the so-called left today, most noticeably evinced in the rise of Blue Labour in the UK.

Wells were also an unabashed eugenicist. In his non-fictional book *Anticipations*, he fashioned a New Republic in which technology would allow perfect citizens to be engineered as he homed in on “improving child rearing-practices and the design of educational regimes appropriate for the nascent technological age”. “Efficients” would rule the world, and in a classic case of the survival of the fittest, the less efficient, less worthy would perish. Wells’ paradoxical admixture of socialism, anti-imperialism, and eugenics is compounded by his fundamental antipathy to the racial theorizing and white supremacy that was the norm at the time. Indeed, he writes: “there is no more evil thing in this present world than Race Prejudice [...] Thru its body runs the black blood of coarse lust, suspicion, jealousy and persecution and all the darkest passions of the human soul” (Bell 2020: 162). Perhaps it is merely a coincidence, or a distinctly twenty-first century cavil, but it is notable that just as he censures racial thinking, Wells’ luxuriates in racial imagery. Race Prejudice has “black blood” coursing through its body, and arouses “the darkest passions of the human soul”, Wells’ affirms. Racism is bad, racism is Black.



## The multiplicity and the consequences of racial imaginaries

Dreamworlds of Race also engages luminaries such as Arthur Conan Doyle, Arthur Balfour, Joseph Chamberlain, Goldwin Smith and Alfred Mahan, among others. These men (and they were all men) adumbrated multiple versions of Anglotopia that promised peace and prosperity, but were all underpinned by an unflinching racial grammar. The fecundity and capaciousness of the imaginaries are remarkable: Smith for instance outlined “a fractal” account of patriotism in which loyalty was owed to groups at different spatial and geographical scales (Scottish patriotism as a subset of British patriotism as a subset of Anglo-Saxon patriotism, for instance); Chamberlain saw Britain and the United States as members of the same racial community but had a more complicated account of patriotism; Mahan was a champion of racial affinity, postulating the “binding effects” of racial patriotism. There were still others, “Little Englanders” written off by the more “progressive” global imperialists of the day. (Again, the resonances and frictions are nothing short of astonishing).

But it is not merely the assortment of racial imaginaries that is remarkable. It is also the ways in which these imaginaries interspersed with and shaped the other domains in the lives of these men. Sherlock Holmes, Arthur Conan Doyle’s legendary literary invention continues to be a feature in Britain’s cultural landscape. These books, loved by adults and children alike, and made into films, TV series and plays peddle in thinly-veiled (and often barefaced) racist tropes and narratives. In *The Sign of the Four* the people of the Andaman Islands in the Indian Ocean are described thus: “they are naturally hideous, having large, misshapen heads, small fierce eyes and distorted features ... They have always been a terror to shipwrecked crews, braining the survivors with their stone-headed clubs, or shooting them with their poisoned arrows. These massacres are invariably concluded by a cannibal feast” (Gupta 2021).

Even more pertinently for students of politics, Balfour who went on to become the Prime Minister of Britain, is best remembered for the eponymous Balfour Declaration, a public statement issued by the British government in 1917 which pledged support for the establishment of a Jewish homeland in Palestine. The aftermath of this need not be rehearsed, but one can’t help but impute at least some of the horrors of Palestinian suffering to the heady dreams of white supremacy and Anglo imperial hegemony.

## The racism, oh the racism

The different constellations of thought that constituted Anglotopia mapped out by Duncan Bell range from the granular to the nebulous. Some are simplistic and light on detail, whilst others are complex and intricate. But even the most sophisticated of them are only thoughtful in a “conditional way”. These conditions are: a gradated but rigid hierarchy of humankind with the “Anglo-Saxons” at the top; the full and complete excision of people of colour (anybody racialised as non-white) from the



remit of humanity; and a steadfast belief that peace was only possible if this hierarchy remained unchallenged, and preferably sedimented over time.

The alternative visions sketched out by the steampunk movement, and especially by African and Black authors at the same time that Bell delineates, unfortunately seem relatively meek and at times even unimaginative. I do not mean to suggest that these visions themselves are stale (Afro-futurism in particular is an expansive and intellectually dazzling movement), but rather that the horizon of resistance appears conspicuously hemmed in. It is difficult to gauge whether this is a function of the time given the ubiquity and violent domination of the extant white racial superiority or whether it is owed to a difficulty in unpacking a slew of alternative imaginaries articulated by people of colour, including Black, indigenous and colonised persons at the end of a book that has already done, and given us, so much. Nonetheless, as Vineet Thakur notes in his review, one cannot help but feel that these alternative imaginaries feel a bit ‘tokenistic’ and tacked on. Centring and foregrounding these movements, or indeed dealing with them in another (fourth!) book would perhaps have been a different and more generous way to grapple with their path-blazing ideas. Even so, and as always with Bell’s lucid and precise writing, the little we do get is generative and pregnant with the promise of further unpacking.

In the final analysis, an Anglo-Saxon utopia based on fairness (read racism, transphobia, misogyny), peace (read invasions), prosperity (read unfettered capitalism) and technological advancement (read climate change and the destruction of the planet) is a terrifying prospect to behold. However, given that this is not a premonitory fear of a clued-in teenager in 2021 but the culmination of the profoundest thoughts of some of the most fêted “visionaries” of the early twentieth Century is some indication of the limits of the white imaginary.

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